The Fruit of the Tree of your own Wickedness

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The Fruit of the Tree of your own Wickedness

by DevilsHerb

Summary

Will finds himself in Florence a year after "that night" on the trail of Hannibal. Still recovering from the psychological and emotional fall out, he seeks another, yes, psychiatrist to keep him stable. Unknown to Will, Hannibal and Bedelia have settled in Florence, too. Unknown to Hannibal, Will is in Florence with his new psychiatrist. Doctor Daniel Clayton has some empathic gifts of his own and it will be his misfortune that he bears a striking resemblance to Will. Each of them has an agenda and while Daniel and Will engage in therapy one chance encounter places them in a deadly game between Hannibal and Bedelia. But sometimes things are not always as they appear.

A viper will devour another viper. But a mongoose can be trained to temper its bite.
Whatever you are doing with Will Graham; stop.

This story is updated regularly like a serial. If Fate should gather the shattered teacup and bring Hannibal and Will together again after Mizumono, then this fic should be most appealing.

Notes

This is my first attempt at fanfic but I am so enamored with NBC's Hannibal that I was inspired to take a stab at it. I am still learning how to use this site, so be patient with the formatting.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

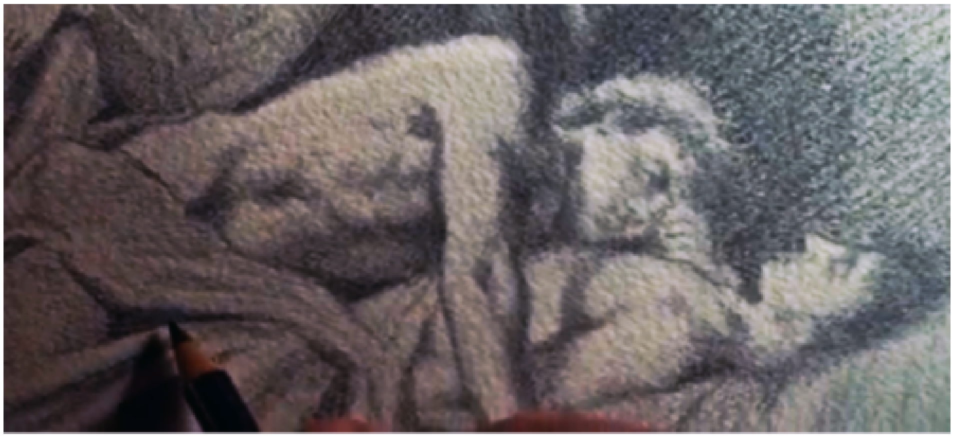
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Fruit of the Tree of your own Wickedness

Said Achilles to Patroclus as he prepared to battle the Trojans in Achilles' armor:

You must not, in the pride and fury of fighting, go on slaughtering the Trojans, and lead the way against Ilion, for fear some one of the everlasting gods on Olympus might crush you…if only not one of all the Trojans could escape destruction, not one of the Argives, but you and I could emerge from the slaughter so that we two alone could break Troy's hallowed coronal.

But Hector, when he saw high hearted Patroclus trying to get away, saw how he was wounded with sharp javelin, came close against him across the ranks, and with the spear stabbed him in the depth of the belly and drove the bronze clean through.



The Iliad, Chapter 16

Chapter 1

While searching for Hannibal in Florence, Will is having trouble coping with his usual demons…

Will sits hunched in the backseat of the taxi, clenching the small amber-colored prescription vial. He didn't want to take the dose, the pills made him nauseous, but they did a better job of keeping the headaches away than aspirin. With a resigned sigh, he finally tosses a couple in his mouth and chases them down with his cold Italian roasted coffee. He stares out the car window as people amble by; passing the cab without difficulty. He thinks maybe he should have walked.

It wouldn't be the first time he'd been duped by an Italian taxi driver, although he had found most of them to be honest most of the time…mostly. He would probably have made it here in the same amount of time had he walked. Still, he would have had to traverse from one end of the city to the other. Florence in the summer was gorgeous, but sweltering.

“How much further is it?” Will asks. He rubs his hands over his Levis again. His palms are moist despite the air conditioning and his mouth is dry, metallic, flat. He is so very, very tired of going through this charade.

“Oh, is a…not much further, we are almost there. Less than five minutes, I promise *Signore*.” The cab driver grins into his rearview mirror.

Will tries not to notice the grease under the man’s fingernails or the stubborn grime covering calloused hands that won’t come off no matter how much he scrubs at the residue before leaving his other job as a car mechanic to start his shift. Or the throbbing cavity in his left jaw that causes him to wince each time his tongue compulsively presses on the offending tooth due to the dental appointments he keeps skipping because his young daughter whose picture is taped to his dashboard has just graduated from high school and is off to attend a university he can’t really afford. Or the argument he had with his wife this morning after she threw his breakfast at him, coffee stain on his collar and tidbits of scrambled egg ground into his scalp visible beneath the hasty trim the man had given himself in his cluttered bathroom. Hair clipped from the razor is sticking to the adhesive of the opened envelope containing the unpaid utility bill, the one that set off the wife tucked up in the sun visor. The ripped envelope draws the cab driver’s attention relentlessly.

Will nods and smiles taking in another resigned breath. He finds himself doing that a lot.

After much prompting from Jack, Will had accepted Mason Verger’s offer to hunt down Hannibal Lecter and bring him back. Will had stood at the foot of Mason’s sumptuous bed, Margot at Mason’s side, stiffly holding his hand. Her beautiful if impassive face had seemed to float above the carnage that was her brother. Carnage that Will had not only witnessed, but had lifted not one finger to stop, his tacit approval tantamount to complicity, and his lack of regret complete and savagely satisfying.

Margot’s feelings about her brother had been abundantly clear. Her feelings about Will had not been. It was only after she had shown Will to the door that Margot allowed herself a lingering pass of her fingertips across Will’s hand and had let slip a smile as tantalizingly elusive as the Mona Lisa’s.

Mason had specific plans about taking his particular brand of revenge on the man who had ruined his face and left him paralyzed. Mason’s plans were his own affair. Jack’s plans were tied up in bureaucratic red tape. Will had plans of his own.

Will slips his hand under his loose button down shirt, traces his fingers over the scar extending like a vein beneath his ribcage. If he closed his eyes and allowed the memory to take him over he would feel the curved blade of the linoleum knife sinking into his flesh. Would see the tear rimmed eyes and rueful smile on Lecter’s lips as he twisted it tenderly into Will’s belly. He doesn’t allow it.

More than a year had passed since that night. Life for Will is a timeline of before and after. Life before Garret Jacob Hobbs. Life before Abigail, and life after, and after again… Life before Hannibal Lecter. Will does not think what life after Hannibal will look like if he should even survive it. He has no frame of reference for that scenario. Will wears his weariness like a stone around his neck and it is becoming too heavy to bear. The stone is the reason for his trip today.

Will is shaken out of his reverie by the cab driver’s voice. “Here we are, *Signore*…”

Will pays him in euros and tips him well. It is not his money anyway. Besides, he will likely see this driver again if he decides to continue coming here. He watches the driver ease back into traffic and turns his attention to the building in front of him. Will's Italian is getting better, but the plaque is in English. It reads *Ventresca and Associate, Partners in Mental Health*.

Will takes a deep breath. Perhaps the fourth try will prove the charm.

The building is centuries old and is beautifully preserved and well-maintained on the exterior. No expense was spared in the landscaping either. The interior has been fully renovated to accommodate modern amenities; old world collides with the new, before and after, combined. Will checks in with the receptionist who speaks a modicum of English and graciously provides a demitasse of espresso while he waits. He's had more than enough coffee today but he sips at it anyway.

The associate Will chose, D. B. Clayton, Ph.D., MD, had only his last name to recommend him, at least initially. It was not foreign. No more shrinks with accents he promised himself. Will had not been able to make a connection with the previous three psychiatrists with whom he had actually kept his appointments. He had stayed long enough with the previous one to refill his prescription. Among his reasons for dismissing them, language was at the top of the list. He had tired quickly of repeating himself in an effort to clarify, clarify, clarify….

Will also wanted to stay away from any shrinks connected to mental hospitals. He could only imagine how difficult it would be to get out of one in a foreign country. Besides his American name, Clayton had also been published and it had been his therapeutic focus that had caught Will's attention. His well-received research had shown the benefits of bonding with pets, especially dogs, as part of a healing process. The articles had lauded the empathic abilities of canines.

He takes another sip and finishes off the espresso. Seeking advice or referrals from home is a last resort, although he considers he might have to if this doesn't work out. He's not sure who he could ask. He has kept his contact with Frederick to a minimum. Chilton has called in prescriptions for him, but Will does not appreciate the verbal acrobatics he has to perform to get them. How Chilton can remain so chatty after having facial reconstruction is a mystery. He hopes this appointment will be different.

Will doesn't have long to wait for his answer. The receptionist instructs him to walk upstairs and take the first door on his right. She tells him he should walk right in. Will climbs the steps and stands before the door. He hesitates, his hand barely touching the brass doorknob.

Come in, Will. I have been expecting you.

He turns the knob and opens the door. The office is not what he always imagines. Not even close. It is quite the opposite of Hannibal's oppressively dim yet elegantly furnished suites in Baltimore. Will takes a step into a sea of blue. His eyes are greeted by ocean colored stucco walls and large bay windows that open onto azure sky and cypress trees. A balcony, framed by expansive French doors, opens up to more clear sky. The room is fragrant with the aroma of the flowering trees outside of the windows. Will cannot place the variety, but it doesn't really matter. He is reminded of the smell of mimosa mingled with magnolia growing around his parents' first home in Louisiana.

Will sees the psychiatrist leaning over his desk against the glare of the Tuscan sun. His peripheral vision tells him that the man is tan, brown haired, and slender. He wears wire rimmed glasses. His suit is casual, he wears a simple skinny tie and the sand colored jacket and olive green trousers are clearly tailored. Will runs his hands over his own wrinkled shirt and tries to remember if he did indeed grab a fresh one this morning or if he picked one up off the floor of his rented room.

“Dr. Clayton?” Will asks still standing in the doorway. He squints in the direction of the desk, but the bursting sunlight from the open balcony behind the desk casts the doctor in silhouette.

“Hello. You must be Mr. Graham. Please…have a seat and I’ll be right with you.”

The voice is smooth, low pitched and pleasant. Will complies walking immediately toward the pair of arm chairs facing each other by the bay window. He savors the breeze and the floral aromas as he takes his seat. His energies are focused on the task before him. He sets his book bag on the beige Berber carpet and begins to mentally prepare himself for the interview that probably won’t take very long.

Will curses under his breath thinking he should have told the cab driver to wait. He tries to relax, but gives up. He occupies his restless mind by taking in the doctor’s office, his eyes recording everything he sees. His gift is relentlessly at work filling his mind with images and sensations from the vast display of objects and their particular placement in the room.

Clayton observes Will as he clicks off his e-mail and rifles around his desk for his notebook and pen. He notes his prospective patient has completely ignored the cluster of comfortable couches and coffee table that fill the room between entrance and balcony preferring the pair of chairs facing each other off to the side. He watches the young man cataloguing the contents of his office, eyes darting around with interest but Clayton recognizes learned behavior when he sees it.

This obviously troubled young man has either been trained to take inventory or he does it to cope with new surroundings. He has certainly been conditioned to assume the defensive position in the most confrontational of seating arrangements. Clayton wonders how many mental battles the young man has fought in a similar chair.

Clayton notices Will’s agitation about his clothes. Clayton has to concede that this young man is not outfitted like his usual label conscious patients and is aware of it by the way he tugs at the collar of his pale blue cotton shirt. The agitation and the tugging indicate a certain residual discomfiture left over from a childhood spent in poverty, or close to it. Deciding to make his potential patient more relaxed, he levels the playing field by removing his jacket so that he too is wearing only a cotton shirt. He hangs his jacket on the back of his chair and walks to the center of the room.

“Interesting choice, Mr. Graham. “ Clayton nods at Will but comments no further. He gestures toward the other side of the room. “But, I generally talk with patients over here.” Clayton says as he stands where he is to greet his new patient.

Will shakes his hair out of his eyes, pushes up his glasses and brushes past Clayton to the couches. He selects the closest one and sinks into it. Will knows why he sat where he did and he silently reprimands himself. Old habits die hard. He must be slipping to fall for one of the most obvious ploys from the psychologist’s community bag of tricks. He realizes he has just informed the doctor of a multitude of things about himself without even opening his mouth. Will shakes it off; nothing he can do about it now. He came here for help, after all.

Clayton notices the sunlight is hitting Will directly and crosses to the window and adjusts the blinds before he lowers himself into the arm chair adjacent to Will’s couch. He wants no external reasons for avoidance. He suspects his prospective patient has plenty of his own.

Will focuses his attention on the other open window but steals glances at Clayton's hands while he opens his notebook to a fresh blank page. His finger nails are manicured but Will notices the skin of his knuckles and palms are a little rough and the tan is genuine. These hands know toil and the outdoors.

Will also notices the pattern of roses on the tie is hand stitched pale sand colored silk on chocolate colored satin, and the white linen shirt Clayton wears is pressed so that it lay in perfect planes against Clayton's torso. His shoes are simple leather loafers; well-made and maintained but Will figures they must be a favorite pair judging by the wear on the upturned soles Will observes as Clayton crosses his legs, calf to knee. Clayton does not scream money; his style is understated and implies his affinity for the finer things.

Clayton looks Will over for a few more seconds before he speaks. He is intrigued by Graham's appearance and not a little concerned by Will's behavior. Graham's demeanor is pensive and awkward. For being as good looking as he is, there is no evidence that he suffers from vanity, and he could use a little dose of vanity. To say Mr. Graham is unkempt would be an understatement. Clayton realizes eye contact is going to prove a challenge. He knows he will be able to read this young man without the advantage that eye contact affords him, but gazing into these eyes would yield volumes.

He watches Will flinch in response to the slamming of a car door outside and the blare of the horn as the owner apparently struck the wrong button on the key fob. Clayton takes a moment to decide on an approach that won't send this skittish young man out his door.

"Comfortable?" Clayton asks.

"More or less." Will mumbles in answer. He knows he should make the effort to be more socialized but he is just so damned tired…

"Well, uh, it is customary for patients to send ahead insurance information and referrals. And preferably some kind of…"

Will produces a folder from his book bag and waves it in the air.

"…file. Thanks." Clayton finishes and reaches for the official looking and bound folder. Will sets it down on the coffee table.

"I think I'll hold on to this a little longer." Will says.

Clayton lets his eyes linger on the file a couple seconds. It is nearly an inch thick. He raises his eyes to Will's face, a face stubbornly in profile.

Will has resumed his perusal of the office, focusing on the titles in the bookcases and the choice of art prints adorning the pleasing blue stucco walls. Recognizing avoidant behavior is not difficult for Clayton, he is used to it from patients, but he is essentially being slapped in the face with avoidance right now. Graham has to know what he is doing.

Clayton remarks simply, without judgment, "Not your first rodeo, huh?"

“There’s not as much there as you think. A lot has been…redacted.” Will is staring at the bookcases, his comments to Clayton almost an aside.

“Redacted? By whom?” Clayton sees that the folder, or more accurately the binder, has been placed face down. He rephrases his inquiry. “Why was it redacted?”

“To protect the innocent.” Will says flatly.

And the dead. We cannot forget the dead, Will. How will we honor them?

Clayton hears the unmistakable regret in the words; can feel it. “Ok.” He says, “What brings you here, then?”

Will stares at the floor. His rehearsed statement seems inappropriate suddenly. This doctor feels different than the others to him. Will keeps himself closed up pretty tightly but he can sense a calm emanating from this doctor, a calm that hovers like mist around his carefully constructed defenses rather than crashing like the usual tidal wave he instinctively braces himself for. This doctor has unleashed no tidal wave; rather his presence advances then recedes, still water lapping against the banks of the moat that surrounds his fortress. Will could invite the mist in but he is not prepared to do that just yet.

It is such a relief to not feel the relentless affront, the data stream of unwanted information that comes to him unbidden, that his curiosity remains tucked away behind his fortress.

He raises his head to finally look Clayton in the face. Before he can catch himself, his eyebrows raise and his mouth opens in a silent gasp. He shuts it quickly before he says something stupid.

Clayton eases back in his chair eyeing Will. He had been wondering how long it would take for Graham to engage in more than a cursory assessment of him. He breaks into a grin as he gazes into Will’s face.

“Yeah, I noticed it, too. We uh, look a bit alike. Weird, huh?”

Will nods slowly; pleased that he is not imagining it. “More than a bit, I’d say.”

Will touches his fingers to his lips as he stares at Clayton. Try as he might, his gift fails him. The face staring back into his own is unreadable, and Will is left to relying on nothing but his own keen powers of observation to read the young doctor facing him. Will is not able to reconcile what he sees with what he feels. He’s been assuming things about Clayton, based on a visual assessment, but he doesn’t feel anything. Oddly, he feels alone.

Clayton allows Graham all the time he needs to process. Clayton welcomes the opportunity to finally observe Graham’s face the way he wants. Graham’s eyes are as beautiful as they are illuminating. In fact, Clayton finds more in the deep wells of blue than he had hoped, and then some. Clayton is not prepared for the aching in his chest or the twinge he feels like a ribbon tightening across his abdomen.

Will notes the subtle changes of expression in Clayton’s face but he does not inquire. The physical similarities between the two men are too remarkable and at the moment these have Will’s full attention.

The psychiatrist is about his age, more or less, and appears similar in height and build as he rests comfortably in his arm chair, legs crossed, tablet across his lap, and pen poised above the pristine paper. As Will's eyes pass over his features, the similarities really kick in. He has the same brown curls, styled and clipped a little shorter, but very much the same. Will observes the line of his jaw, recognizes the same penchant for stubble, but Clayton's is meticulously trimmed like a fashion accessory, quite unlike Will's own face that hasn't felt a razor in weeks. Clayton's nose is more narrow than his own; but overall Clayton's face resembles Will's own bone structure, almost a mirror image.

Almost, but for the eyes. Though he wears glasses, his are stylish bronze rimmed glasses; not the dark framed type Will favors. Beyond that, Will sees and feels the difference immediately. Clayton's eyes are clear, open, and very green. Clayton's are also bereft of the churning sea of turmoil Will often finds reflected in his own eyes. Clayton's eyes radiate a kind of tranquility that Will has not felt in a very long time and dares not dream about. If Will were to open himself to it, would he feel some measure of that peace?

Will ponders this while examining Clayton's mouth, a most expressive part of the anatomy and often a reliable indicator of the emotions and motivations percolating just beneath the surface of the words pouring out of it. Will focuses on the lips, soft, supple and shaped like his own. The lips twist a little to one side in amusement as Will lifts his eyes to meet Clayton's.

It has been a long time since Will has devoted so much time studying a face that was not in a state of decomposition. He usually does not look at a person more than a few seconds because he does not need to. Will collects his thoughts and manages to say something conversational. "You are an American, too?"

He receives a nod and another smile. Will is encouraged by the quick smiles. They seem involuntary and far from calculating.

Are you certain, Will?

"How is it you came to practice in Italy?" Will asks, trying to ignore the voice in his head.

Clayton puts the pen and notepad on the table. He gestures about the room with one hand. "That is a valid question. This practice was inherited. I am the sole managing partner here, though I keep the name of the former partner. My professional colleagues practice at two other locations. One, about ten miles west of here, and the other offices are in Rome."

"You are the only psychiatrist here?" Will is incredulous. The structure is rather large and Will cannot begin to calculate the overhead.

"Uh-huh. Early on, right after graduation and passing my boards, I came here on a trip. I fell in love with the place. Didn't want to go back. But I did. I made some contacts, put in my time for a couple years and then applied for a VISA after receiving an invitation from Vittorio Ventresca the former resident psychologist here. This was his practice until he retired two years ago."

Will was curious as to why this particular guy. What skill set did he possess that he could rise so quickly in his profession? "Why you?" Will realizes his tone too late.

Clayton's smile doesn't falter, "His practice had a particular niche he didn't know how to fill. As it turned out, I was uniquely qualified over his other colleagues to fill that niche."

"What niche would that be?"

"Treating Americans. That is why you are here? Can't relate to the Italian doctors?"

Will laughs a little and considers his own experience in the last couple weeks. He had found Italian psychiatrists no less or no more patronizing than their American versions. He had no issues with their degree of competence; he just hadn't felt comfortable, but he never felt comfortable, especially around psychiatrists. He knew they had been ill at ease with him as well. Of course, he did view things a little differently than most.

"What's the problem exactly? You're saying Italian doctors are prejudiced against Americans?"

"I wouldn't label it prejudice; but Europeans, especially those around the Mediterranean, have a different mindset. They don't *get* Americans. "

Will is somewhat relieved that perhaps the doctors' seeming discomfort had not been limited to him.

"Still, I wouldn't think we are so different." Will insists, getting into the conversation, "I mean, culture is not such an insurmountable obstacle to the point that you can't relate to a human being or treat a person. The human condition is universal. Psychology is universal."

Human emotions are a gift from our animal ancestors, Will.

"Very true. But, the application of universal principles still requires context. Americans are often offended by Italian mannerisms; at the very least they misinterpret them and Italians…" Clayton pauses and pours two tall glasses of water from the ice filled terra cotta pitcher on the table. "Italians find us uptight, entitled, and…well, rude."

Will suppresses a smile at this. "So, it's about keeping patients happy, you function as the cultural buffer." He looks at the sparkling glasses of water and can't decide if he's disappointed there isn't wine…

"Yeah, a sort of goodwill ambassador. I get referrals for Americans living abroad, military personnel who don't want a military consult; you know…stuff like that."

Will nods feeling slightly more relaxed than before. He picks up a glass and gulps down half of it without hesitation. The cool tingly liquid flowing down his throat feels and tastes delicious. The coolness spreads through his entire being. He gulps down the rest of the glass and wipes his mouth.

"That…" Will says pointing to the empty glass; "is the most refreshing glass of water I have ever tasted."

Clayton can't help but grin at the enthusiastic response from his otherwise reserved patient. And Clayton has decided he very much wants this Mr. Graham as a patient.

"Thanks, but I can't really take credit for nature. This is spring water from one of Rome's still functional aqueducts. Some of the drinking fountains in Rome are supplied by it. I know there's one near the Coliseum that is. It's bottled and sold locally." Clayton reaches for the pitcher. "Refill?"

Another glass of wine, Will?

"Yes, thank you." Will says, taking the glass and staring into the clear water. He drinks deeply again marveling at the crispness. Will can't help but notice that Clayton is studying him. He feels the familiar prickle up his neck that betrays his self-consciousness at being examined yet again.

Clayton is noticing Graham's pallor, the dark circles under his eyes, and other indicators of a compromised immune system. He surmises Graham is likely suffering from dehydration and doesn't even know it. This young man is so distracted and fractured that his physical wellbeing isn't even on his radar. Or he does not care. And, that is only the tip of the iceberg.

Graham has wrapped himself in a protective blanket or wall for some reason that has the effect of dampening his entire psyche. Clayton can only receive wisps of impressions about him. Clayton has no idea how Graham is able to do this, or more importantly, why he would do this. There is one thing about which Clayton is certain. Graham's blanket is effectively blocking him out. The impressions he does receive from Graham suggest the blanket covers a deep well of pain and regret.

Trauma Clayton thinks. This guy has been traumatized, he's held together solely by sheer determination. Determination was only going to get him so far. He sees Graham glance up at him from the rim of his glass and Clayton leans forward in his chair to see what Graham will do.

As he expects, Graham stays where he is, ignoring the invitation of intimacy and worse, retreating from the tenuous rapport they had just established. Clayton sees the blue eyes becoming cloudy once more. He watches as Will returns his empty glass to the table and begins to smooth his jeans with his hands closed into fists.

Well acquainted with psychiatric tricks and methods, Will instinctively crawls back inside the comfort of his own head. He feels the atmosphere contract as he does so; edginess creeping into every muscle. He forces himself to sit still. He reminds himself it is Clayton's job to analyze him. He came here voluntarily. This guy has never met him before. His experience with Lecter continues to taint every aspect of his life.

Clayton has no idea what is causing the struggle he sees playing out across Graham's face but the young man sitting across from him is struggling to maintain his composure and struggling to even remain in the room.

"Mr. Graham?" Clayton asks quietly. He waits until Will gives him his full attention. "Are you taking any medication right now?"

"Diazepam" Wills mutters. "I have headaches and generalized anxiety."

"Did you take meds today?"

"Yeah, just before I got here. Look, I know I am the one who made the appointment but I'm beginning to think I…" Will doesn't finish. He bites into his lower lip and throws his hands up in a helpless gesture that is more revealing to Clayton than anything he has done or said since he walked through the door.

"Go ahead, finish your thought." Clayton says.

"I don't want to waste your time…"

"How would helping you be a waste of my time? I am compensated almost obscenely for my time and efforts." Clayton's signature smile teases its way onto his lips. "How many?" he asks in his quiet pleasant way.

"How many what?"

"How many shrinks have you interviewed before me? This is an audition isn't it?"

Will holds up three fingers and looks away. Will doesn't know what to make of this guy. He is at once wary of his kindness yet desperate to cling to it. And how long will that kindness remain should this strangely compelling doctor glimpse the darkness Will keeps locked up inside. The void in his psyche where Clayton's emotions should be continues to puzzle Will.

Your empathy makes you unique. You are alone because you are unique. I can help you Will.

"Why didn't they make the cut?" Clayton asks though he's pretty sure that Graham's neuroses prevented any sort of productive dialogue.

"They were Italians." Will says with a straight face.

Clayton acknowledges Graham's little joke with a rap of his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Well, nice to know I have the home court advantage. Why don't you give me some idea of what I'm auditioning for?"

Clayton keeps his tone conversational but the thought of Graham as his patient makes him smile yet again. He has no illusions. If Graham can be persuaded to commit, he will prove a tough nut to crack. Clayton almost winces at his tasteless metaphor. He looks at Will.

Will takes a shaky breath. The role Clayton is auditioning for is a tough act to follow. He is auditioning to clean up Hannibal's mess. How can Will expect anyone to fill that role?

He wants relief. He wants…clarity. Lecter is always nearby whispering in his ear like a devil on his shoulder. Lecter is chipping away at his sanity and he doesn't even have to be present to do it. Will fears he will never ever get him out of his head.

Without each other, we are alone, Will.

Clayton is still sitting quietly in his chair, his eyes looking directly at Will, no…into Will. Far from feeling threatened, Will experiences a coolness run through him not unlike the luscious ripple that coursed through him when he drank the spring water. Will feels the mist descending around him again and he wants to let it inside so badly. He wants to experience this unexpected oasis of tranquility. The longing is so…visceral. Proximity to this doctor seems to arouse emotions within him he has not felt in a long time.

Will stares at his feet. He wants to look at Clayton, but he doesn't trust himself to maintain his veneer of control. He does not want to bare more than he suspects he already has. And yet, his fortress is bathed in that quiet cool mist. He wants to preserve his fortress even as the mist beckons.

We're just alike. This gives you the capacity to deceive me and be deceived by me.

“My issues are complicated, but I came here hoping that I could get some help, some guidance managing some internal struggles. I don’t…I’m not very good at making other people comfortable.”

Clayton understands and accepts Graham’s clumsy apology. “I believe it’s *my* job to make people comfortable.” He is pleased at the hint of a smile his comment draws from Graham. “Let’s hear the symptoms.”

“That’s a tall order, doctor. How much time do you have?” Will asks and his jaw tightens before he can stop himself. He opens his hands in frustration and closes them again. He shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath.

Clayton can tell that Graham has just about expended his inner resources for the time being. The guy looks exhausted and he was exhausted long before he walked into his office. “Tell you what. Let’s finish the audition. Without looking at your file, let me tell you what I see.”

Tell me what you see, Will.

Will raises his brows, “This should be interesting.”

Clayton resists the urge to lean forward and close the space between them. When he speaks, he is careful not to look directly at Will, he averts his gaze so that he should appear to Will to be focused on the background behind him.

“I see a young man, too young, to be carrying around the weight that you insist on managing by yourself. No one’s shoulders are that broad. You present with all the worst symptoms of PTSD. I suspect there are other symptoms I don’t know about.” Clayton pauses, swallows once and continues. “It’s as if someone or something has wounded, no…violated your psyche so profoundly that you have insulated yourself completely. The walls you have erected are so high and so thick that you can’t get out of your own head to save yourself. You… have been cut so deeply that you trust no one, not even yourself.”

Clayton pauses, and Will is convinced his eyes are wet, but he could be imagining it. As for Clayton’s assessment Will can hardly classify it as clinical. He finds himself moved by the emotion behind the man’s words, not to mention his insight. Clayton’s careful handling of him today is not lost on Will. Will does not feel like a curiosity for a change. It’s the little things that count.

Clayton shifts in his chair, a subtle alert that he intends to speak again. He fixes his gaze somewhere above Will’s head and beyond the bay windows. “I admire your determination because you do not have much else going for you right now. Whatever compels you to get up every day must be pretty powerful. And whatever it is, it is all consuming.”

Clayton had no idea how consuming. Will looks to the windows, too. “What’s my motivation?”

Most of what we do, what we believe is motivated by death, Will.

“Fear.” Clayton says. “Fear of getting too close. Fear of other people getting too close to you. But you also fear…failure, so you found the strength to drag yourself in here and I know you do not want to be here. “

Out of the corner of his eye, Clayton watches Graham place his hands in his lap, and bow his head. Clayton's words almost catch in his throat the weight of the burden Graham carries is so evident, so palpable to him.

"I have never met anyone in as much raw emotional pain as you. And I have come across some pretty tormented souls in my line of work. You, Mr. Graham take the proverbial cake."

Clayton falls silent. Will doesn't say anything either. Clayton blinks his eyes a couple times and looks away. He knows the emotional fallout he is receiving from Graham represents the merest fraction of the tempest Graham keeps locked up inside. His own empathy is heightened to a degree that his self-control is waning in Graham's presence.

Understanding begins to dawn on the horizon of Clayton's mind. Graham does not know he is twisting Clayton up in knots. He has no idea. Graham is in lock down because he is accustomed to being overwhelmed by other people. That's why he avoids eye contact. If he looks; he sees. Graham cannot bear seeing any more than he already has.

There can be no other explanation except that Graham is empathic like himself, but his empathy is different and dangerously intense, it must be, since he spends all his energy keeping himself in lock down. Should Graham decide to drop his defenses Clayton knows he will be overwhelmed. He doubts he will be able to sustain his own defenses if Graham were to release his floodgates.

Clayton does know Graham has opened up a little since arriving, whether voluntarily or not. Clayton senses the longing in Graham for contact, for understanding, but he senses bitterness and anger as well. And there is something else about Graham that Clayton finds unsettling. Graham's entire being exudes an animal-like tension. A wild thing pacing in its cage, wary and ready to strike like the predator it is. Clayton has sensed this before; in dogs.

Why Graham feels like a ticking time bomb is anybody's guess. Clayton will need to address and allay the fear first if Graham will let him. Graham's mind opens a crack and then shuts again. Clayton needs Graham to leave open a window so he can find the source of the fear that paints everything else in a tainting of rust and rot. He is incredibly resistant and as unyielding as a brick wall, but Clayton is persistent and patient. He has sensed quite a lot already, too much for an initial consultation. He gazes back at Graham sitting stiffly in the couch, mind clearly someplace else…

Will is contemplating whether or not he should trust this doctor. His mind can be a pretty fragile thing in the wrong hands. He has entrusted it to no one and has already reaped the rewards of loaning it out.

The weeks immediately following his surgery had been the worst. The things he must have said in his drugged out state of mind. The things forensics must have found at Hannibal's house and office…

Memories of those first few weeks after awakening from one nightmare into a fresh one fill Will's mind as he sits, only vaguely aware of the couch or of Clayton. The fragrance of flowers slips away, replaced by the acrid metallic odor of blood soaked kitchen floor, of blood soaked clothes being cut away in the ambulance, of blood laden nostrils struggling to breathe, and later the reeking tinges of it from his own bandages.

He remembers so many things. His refusal to cooperate or discuss any of it with any of the doctors or investigators the FBI paraded through his hospital room, or rather his cell with the police detachment for his *safety*. The near tantrum he had thrown when they wouldn't let him leave. The near total meltdown upon coming home, to his house in Wolf Trap, to find his entire life had been pulled apart and rummaged through like some garage sale by the FBI. He had sobbed for hours while he had cleaned, before falling exhausted on his stripped mattress, alone, without even the company of his dogs. No one had thought to tidy up poor Will Graham's house for his homecoming.

That was because there was no one left. No one except Hannibal. And Jack. Again.

He has already spent months, lonely and exhausting months sorting through the mess of tangled emotions within in his self-imposed total isolation. The problem is his own judgment has been compromised in the wake of the battle being waged in his mind. He knows who he is, but he feels his tether to reality becoming taut, and the impulse to let it snap is strong.

Adapt…evolve…become… A place for Abigail could be made in your world… I gave you a gift Will, but you did not want it.

Clayton clears his throat. He watches Graham blink his eyes and return to the room. Where ever he went, Clayton is sure that it is never far away. Graham spends a lot of time there. Clayton resumes his analysis of Graham, his would be patient.

"You dwell in a dark place that…you cannot or dare not share with anyone and no matter how awful it is you remain trapped in it because the walls you have built keep you there. You believe you deserve to be there. I would very much like to help you climb out if you will let me." He says, his gaze directed at the open window where sunlight and warmth exist seemingly just out of reach.

I am your friend, Will. Let me help you…We are alone without each other.

Will decides he has been alone with Dr. Lecter too long. Hannibal Lecter is not sitting beside him. This is an entirely different person. Will finds him…interesting.

Will also finds himself dumbfounded. If Clayton has never met anyone like Will, Will has never met anyone like Clayton. That this doctor can read him is quite unbelievable. Will is aware of how closed off he is, how insulated he has become, yet this doctor has been able to intuit more about him in a few minutes than anyone he knows, well, almost anyone. And above all else, Clayton is correct about the singular reason he is sitting here right now. If Will cannot find a way to manage his mind, he will never find Lecter, let alone resist him.

The room seems to vibrate, the walls ripple like waves. Will feels the mist gently but persistently seeking ingress; widening a fissure in his mind he did not know was there, not to exploit, but to deliver the balm Will believes it to possess. The balm he needs to heal. Will decides to trust his instincts.

Will's fingers trace the edges of his bound file. His heartbeat is steady and his breaths are even. He is not feeling conflicted, there is no heat running up his neck or chills creeping down his spine. He feels *calm* as he pushes his file across the table so that it rests in front of Clayton. He rises from his seat, more steadily than he thought himself capable.

"After you read this, you may change your mind. But congratulations, you passed the audition."

Clayton looks up at him and can't hide the pleased expression he knows sits squarely on his face. He is further gratified to find Graham's somber blue eyes wide and filled with warmth. Was that hope behind the storm?

"My cell is listed there on the front." Will says as he turns to go.

"Thanks. I'll be in touch." Clayton rises from his seat, but Graham has already reached the door. Clayton watches him leave shutting the door behind him.

Later, in the taxi ride back to his rental, Will thinks about his meeting with Clayton. More specifically, he wonders how Clayton deduced so much. Will is the empath. He's the one who feels so much that people don't even need to be alive or present for him to become overwhelmed with their motives, passions, and darkest desires. The empathy transforms *him*; his empathy does not project onto other people. Is that even possible?

The driver left Will off hours ago yet he cannot sleep. He tosses and turns and finally gives up. It is 2:35 in the morning. He fumbles out of bed, kicking the sheet and blanket he had thrown off hours ago out of his way. It's humid even with the air conditioning so the boxers feel just fine. He wheels the chair out from the computer desk and begins to go through his files. He clicks on the evidence files he has created for the recent unsolved cases in the country. Will selected the cases because they seemed irregular in some way and he has begun the tedious process of reviewing each of them, one by one.

It takes a lot time to sort through each case file, but all Will has is time. He clicks on the next file; a photo of Winston pops up on the screen instead. Will pauses rather than clicking on the file he meant to be looking at. Will stares at the picture of his canine companion, a candid of his favorite furry stray sitting on Will's front porch in Wolf Trap, tongue hanging out, eyes trained on Will taking the picture. Will swallows and feels his heart clench in his chest. His eyes sting as he touches the image on the screen with his fingers. His nose itches suddenly and he rubs it impatiently.

He clicks the picture off and selects the file he was looking for but it sits there forgotten. Will stares out the window into the Tuscan countryside beneath the stars. Will isn't looking into the Tuscan night; he is home, in Wolf Trap, before...

Will crawls into bed before dawn, his eyes burning from staring into the computer. He falls asleep quickly, his body like lead upon the mattress. Soon, he is walking through a forest. It is misty and quiet, strangely quiet for a forest. As Will wades through the underbrush, ducking the low limbs of trees, he notices he has been here in this forest before. He knows he is nearing the stream, *his* stream. He slows his walk, unsure of what he will find if he keeps walking.

The mist around him is thicker. He can no longer see the trees ahead. Something moves in the mist behind him. He turns around but not quickly enough to see it although he hears the crack of branches and he's not sure, but he thinks he hears a snort, like a horse. No, not a horse, a deer…a stag.

Will freezes as a swarm of flies whirls around in a vortex, collecting itself into a ball then a shape. Will watches as the dense mass transforms into the ravenstag of his dreams. He invariably backs away, wondering why the magnificent beast has returned. Will watched it gasp its last breath on the blood drenched floor of Hannibal's kitchen. Its muscles ripple beneath the thick black fur along its back, feathers fan across its hind quarters and its neck, framing its elegant head like a mane as it waves its antlers at him in the moonlight.

The stag turns gracefully and faces Will. Rather than charge him, the stag rears up on its hind legs, its glossy fur and feathers writhe like Medusa's tendrils. From out of the mist and tangle of trees Will hears a low guttural growl. A white wolf leaps out and lands directly in front of the stag, a sleek coil of fur and teeth. It does not move though the ravenstag's hooves flail to the earth inches from its nose. The ravenstag shudders.

Light and shadow play across the ravenstag as it begins to turn white, tail first, the milky color overtaking the stag like liquid frost.

When at last the antlers are frosty white; the stag lunges at Will. Will barely has time to think before he is tumbling backward, landing in snow but freefalling through it as the ravenstag's hooves pass overhead, disintegrating into mist then snowflakes that descend upon Will as he falls deeper and deeper into the snow.

Will slams back into his bed and awakens clutching his sheet on either side. He takes a couple gulps of air and smiles. For once, his T-shirt is dry and his body and bed are not drenched in sweat. He thinks of the snow, the mist, the wolf, and the white ravenstag.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Title: Hindu fable The Brahmin and the Mongoose illustrates the danger of acting in haste. It is a tale of mistakes, misattribution, and wrongful death. This line occurs near the end of the story, after all the unfortunate events have culminated in the death of the mongoose.
Most Italicized quotes from Hannibal that Will hears in his head are from dialogue lifted directly from the series, but I improvised when needed with the intent of keeping the spirit of the series.
All other italicized quotes remembered by characters in this story are lifted from actual dialogue when possible.
Any quotes from literary sources are identified within the text.
The name Hannibal chooses to use in Florence, Boucher, is French for butcher.
Majolica refers to highly decorated and glazed earthen ware pottery made in Italy.
Ancient Greeks portrayed Eros as a capricious god, sometimes cruel and powerful enough that even the other gods would fall under his spell. He carried both gold and lead tipped arrows. The gold bestowed love, while the lead repelled love. Later, the Romans began to portray Eros as the child Cupid we know.
There will be more notes as chapters are posted.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> “This is my design…”
> “Ay!” The clipped cry intrudes upon the blissful silence in Will’s mind.
> Will is shaken from his trance by a rough shove to his shoulder. Someone is speaking to him in Italian and he sounds angry. Will stumbles forward, catches himself and stands upright. He has the presence of mind to click off the recorder. He stands clenching the phone, unable to understand the words but he doesn’t need to. The police officer has his pistol leveled at Will’s head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_________________Chapter 2___________________

Clayton reads Will’s file and Will inadvertently inserts himself into a murder investigation. Not a good idea…

Four days later, Graham’s file still rests on Clayton’s night stand. Not because he wants it there. William Graham will not answer his phone, nor will he return his messages. Clayton does not believe he has been excessive in leaving messages. He has left only two. He checks his cell constantly, hoping he has switched it to silent by accident, but the ring is set on high.

Every evening since his encounter with Graham, Clayton has driven home to his house in Fiesole, an ancient town nestled among the hills on the outskirts of Florence, away from the crowds and unrelenting vendors. And every evening he sips coffee from atop his patio overlooking the Arno Valley and all of Florence as the last rays of sunlight pass over the gleaming cross of the dome atop the Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore wondering why he has not heard from Graham. He finds his confidence is beginning to wane tonight. Surely there had been a connection between them. He had felt it. How could Graham ignore it?

Later, he pets his dog's ears absently, stroking behind her ears and massaging the thick black fur of her neck while she lies next to him in the bed Clayton acknowledges is more hers than his. He doesn't mind though. Cara as he calls her has been his constant companion since he brought her home from the shelter almost four years ago, almost as long as his other dog lying on the rug beside the bed. Five year old Belladonna, a black and white mutt, probably lab and collie mix, rolls her head and gazes at Clayton. He leans down to pet her as well.

"Sorry girls, it's not lights out yet." Bella yawns and Cara huffs into the blankets. He sits in bed with his laptop feeling its weight and warmth on his legs, and although he has plenty of work he could be doing, he feels no desire whatever to actually upset the screensaver.

His thoughts turn back to Graham, as they have frequently since meeting him. Clayton tries to ameliorate his misgivings about not hearing from Graham. He tells himself it's nothing personal, that Graham simply is not good at or especially particular about keeping or making contact with other people. There was a lot, however, that Clayton needed to talk to him about.

Graham had not been exaggerating about the degree of redaction in his file. There must have been an awful lot of innocents needing protecting. Still, Clayton has surmised that his initial analysis had merit. Graham is most certainly suffering from trauma complicated by a rare "gift" of pure empathy. Clayton is sure that Graham does not view his empathic ability as a gift. Clayton can identify with Graham to a degree. His own empathic gift is much more manageable.

Clayton has never met anyone with Graham's mental wiring. Graham's mind worked in ways that were impossible to catalogue let alone predict. He doubts Graham can explain it himself, but Clayton figures that Graham often finds himself wondering why other people can't see what is perfectly obvious to him.

Graham suffers from what Clayton recognizes as a heightened cognitive empathy, the ability to assume the perspective of another. Graham was evidently exceptionally “gifted”, going beyond assuming perspectives straight to adopting them. He had apparently adopted the identities of criminals and psychopaths in order to help the FBI catch them. Graham must have been a most valuable asset in the field, a profiler able to put himself in the minds of the killers he was tasked with capturing.

At least until something had gone dreadfully wrong, and the hunter identified too closely with his prey. All manner of mayhem appeared to have ensued, the details carefully obscured behind euphemisms apparently coded for the initiated few with the requisite clearance. Clayton had gathered that Graham had been granted an indefinite leave of absence, charges of accessory to entrapment and murder suspended, pending a further investigation of…whatever it was that had gone down.

The lack of information in the file did not frustrate Clayton as much as the lack of medical and psychological records on Graham. Even the evaluation that had kept Graham from becoming a proper FBI agent had been alluded to but not included. Page after page of clinical notes from his stay at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane had been reduced to snippets of the same redundant phrases. He dismissed Frederick Chilton’s comments on principle. *Preening peacock,* Clayton had rolled his eyes. The names of the other contributing psychiatrists had been redacted but their comments were all the same. Dissociative Identity, paranoia, acute generalized depression, and the list went on. Clayton sadly noted there was not even a hint of compassion in the diagnoses of the “subject”.

Clayton cannot believe the absence of medical history on Graham. There was virtually nothing from his most recent hospital stay. This particular stay had apparently been the straw that broke the FBI’s back with regard to Graham.

Graham had been stabbed in the line of duty, nearly eviscerated; organs remarkably spared though there had been a substantial amount of blood loss. He had been kept under observation for several weeks before being released. A waiver had been signed by Graham indicating that he left against the attending doctors’ instructions. Clayton remembers the sharp twinge of pain he felt at the office and understands that though the wound has healed on Graham’s body; the wound left in his mind has not.

Graham refused to participate in any psychiatric therapy and was completely uncooperative with both FBI personnel about the investigation and with attempts to engage or otherwise evaluate him in any clinical way except to treat his injury. Clayton notes this information is included as an addendum in a transparent effort to exonerate both the FBI and the mental health division of the hospital. The entire assessment of Graham is, to put it mildly, unkind.

Graham’s status as “Special Agent” had been largely fabricated by one Jack Crawford. This Jack Crawford appeared prominently in all the reports and his signature graced nearly every piece of paper in the file. As head of the BAU, he had apparently overstepped his authority on more than a few occasions, but especially where Graham was concerned, and was no doubt under investigation along with his prized profiler.

The follow up searches he had performed on the internet had not been entirely fruitless, but the pickings were meager. The FBI had effectively kept the media in the dark. There was no way Clayton could piece together events based on newspaper articles from Baltimore or D.C. Clayton was out of his element in this sort of thing. He simply did not have the time to cross reference all the articles. More to the point, he had no law enforcement background, no legal training. His formal education had supplied him with the requisite tools to excel in his field of expertise, but not in the capacity of detective or criminal profiler.

And then his search had stumbled upon some blog called *Tattle Crime*. Clayton had spent nearly all night reading the gossip columns of one Freddie Lounds. No redactions there and a plethora of material had been nestled in the archives; at least some of the articles. Article after article came up listed as no longer available. The FBI had essentially rendered the site worthless.

Some earlier articles remained however. The Minnesota Shrike and the Chesapeake Ripper were only the most notorious of the serial killers with whom Will Graham was familiar. Clayton had been shocked to learn that Graham had been indicted and tried for murder. The charges had been withdrawn and the details on that were murky, but the murders were related to the Shrike and the Ripper. Graham had at least been exonerated.

Graham's incarceration and trial had received special attention from Lounds. Lounds had accused Graham of being a psychopathic serial killer. She had said as much on the witness stand, along with, no surprise, Chilton. Mr. Graham had certainly rubbed her the wrong way. And Graham apparently had no affection for her either.

Clayton had laughed out loud at some of Graham's comments to her. Although Graham's favorite response had been to tell Lounds to fuck off in some fashion or other, Clayton had found one nugget especially revealing.

"It's not very smart to piss off the guy who thinks about killing people for a living."

But at some point, Lounds' articles about Graham had stopped suddenly. She had been writing a series of articles speculating on the real Chesapeake Ripper, apparently several people had been investigated, when she had disappeared and been believed dead, perhaps by the Ripper himself. Her blog had taken a hiatus of almost three months during which time her whereabouts were unknown. When her blog resumed, Lounds disclosed nothing in that regard. There had been no more mentions of the Ripper, Graham, or anyone else related to the FBI investigation.

Her book deal with Abigail Hobbs, daughter of the Minnesota Shrike, was as dead as the daughter, whose body had finally been found; the details in the report removed with surgical precision. Graham must have been affected by that outcome if only because he had saved the girl from her father, but knowing Graham, his involvement with Abigail would have been deeply emotional.

Clayton noted that visitors to the blog site had been diminishing over the last year. The site was active, Lounds still posted material and responded to questions, but Baltimore was currently a pretty dull place. Lounds' day in the sun was evidently fading fast.

Clayton had read until his eyes stung so badly he was forced to shut off the computer and go to bed. It was at that point that Clayton realized he was treating a celebrity of the darkest kind. That was two nights ago.

The last couple of days had sped by; he barely remembered talking with his patients. He had cancelled his last two appointments this afternoon because he was simply too distracted to pay attention to them. He told himself he was doing them a favor since the patient notes he had taken were filled with doodles and nearly incomprehensible. He had thrown them in the trash and hoped nothing important had come up during any of the sessions. Graham's arrival had thrown his practice into disarray in a matter of days.

Clayton picks up the file and decides to peruse it one more time. Even though it had been carefully pieced together to provide the broadest of interpretations, Clayton is hopeful he will find something inadvertently left untouched by the insidious black marker. He promises himself he will try Graham again only after he has finished reading. He glances out his bedroom window, sees the lights of Florence that shimmer across the valley below and wonders what Graham is doing on this warm Tuscan night.

Less than half a mile from the west bank of the Arno, Will circles the perimeter of what will soon be a major crime scene. He knows a police entourage when he sees one, and though the local LEOs are trying to keep their presence under wraps, it is blatantly obvious to the trained eye that any minute now this entire area is going to be cordoned off. Will chooses his vantage point and settles in among the trees and shrubs that shroud him in darkness.

Will has made a few contacts during his time in Florence, contacts that do not mind allowing him access to internal memos and communications of the Firenze Police Department. Like their American counterparts, Italian police officers were not above accepting gifts and bribes to supplement meager salaries. Will has found Italian police particularly receptive to bribes, some expecting the practice as an inevitable courtesy.

Almost any information could be obtained for the right price. Mason Verger's immense fortune and influence had been greasing Will's way for several months. Now that Will was in the Florentine Province of Tuscany, Verger's clout really kicked in. Tuscany was of course where his wonderful flesh eating pigs were nurtured and raised. Will had in his employ, two of Verger's most trusted confidents, a brother and sister who ironically, doted on each other in a way Will found just south of unhealthy.

What they did when he wasn't around was none of his business. His association with them was nominal and they were efficient. He is in this location thanks to their persistence this evening. Will had received a call from Lucia earlier about the police presence south of the Palazzo Pitti which was barely a ten minute walk from Will's rented room. According to Lucia, the body might be missing organs. She had not been able to be specific about which organs, but there was some drama attached to the corpse, some staging that seemed to indicate the killer had gone beyond the mundane.

Her brother, Luciano, had already insinuated himself back at the police precinct, to await the return of the detectives and officers once the scene had wrapped up, and the body on its way to the coroner. He would gather what information he could, and report it to Graham.

Will had been about to call Clayton when Lucia called. Will had been meaning to return his messages, but time seemed to get away from him when he was focused as he was now. What Will wanted was to get close enough to profile the crime scene, his way. He has had to resort to long range surveillance in order to observe. He prefers the risk of physically being here to look at the crime scene rather than visualize through photos. Photos are extremely difficult to procure anyway.

He sits crouched in shadow with high powered binoculars to his eyes, scanning the area while it remains relatively empty of cops and crime scene investigators. He is relieved that the police have followed protocols and the scene appears pristine. At last, he has a clear line to the victim. Will braces himself, observing each precious detail before he lets the killer into his mind.

A trail of votive candles, burnt down low now, illuminates a path through the moonless night leading to the display. Several sets of footprints denote a struggle. The body rests in rigor on a simple bench, leaning against the cement wall behind it. Freshly clipped tree branches lay upon the blood soaked ground framing the body on either side. They have fallen from their perch beneath the victim to join the pile of trimmings; the sprigs of green betray the killer's haste in making due with found objects in the area. The killer did not come fully prepared, but he came prepared enough. There is a message here.

As Will catalogues every nuance his mind begins to recreate the moments before the victim sees his killer… Will hits record, and speaks quietly into his phone.

"I have followed him to this place, this grotto hidden off the beaten path. This place shields him from prying mortal eyes so he can revel in what he does in private. I have been dreaming about this moment for a long time.

"I take him from behind so that his prize can squirm away. I do not need to tell him to leave. The prize stumbles away, I do not know where. I do not care. My eyes do not wander from my target. He knows me. And he knows why I am here.

"The killing and subsequent evisceration are brutal. I am ecstatic and highly aroused. Blood sprays against the concrete walls from the well-aimed slash that opens his neck exposing and effectively severing the carotid. I watch him bleed out in my arms. When I am satisfied that his eyes are empty of life, I gut him with one stroke.

"Viscera explode from the gaping wound; a grotesque bouquet of entrails cascades to the ground from the single incision I make from sternum to pelvis. His trousers and soiled underclothes are gathered around his feet. While this display is humiliating, I am not finished. I place tree branches beneath his arms to prop them up so that they fold across his chest in a mockery of supplication. I make sure his eyes are turned upward to the heavens and his tongue protrudes from his mouth as he awaits the communion wafer that I place on his tongue.

"This is my design…"

"Ay!" The clipped cry intrudes upon the blissful silence in Will's mind.

Will is shaken from his trance by a rough shove to his shoulder. Someone is speaking to him in Italian and he sounds angry. Will stumbles forward, catches himself and stands upright. He has the presence of mind to click off the recorder. He stands clenching the phone, unable to understand the words but he doesn't need to. The police officer has his pistol leveled at Will's head.

The cop realizes Will is not a local. The scruffy looking guy looks American considering his frumpy clothes. Americans had no fashion sense whatsoever and this guy…just when he thought American's couldn't dress any worse. He doesn't appear to be homeless. He is at least washed up and his clothes are clean. He is relieved the guy has enough sense to raise his hands in surrender. He holsters his weapon, seeing that another officer has taken position behind the odd young man holding the phone. He huffs his passable English at Will, his huge hand reaches for Will's phone.

"Give me that! And show me some identification."

Will feels the phone vibrating in his hand. He glances at the screen, sees it is Clayton calling. He ignores the outstretched hand of the cop and fingers the button that will accept the call. He places Clayton on speaker and closes his fingers around his phone.

"I am an American citizen and I do not have to give you my phone." Will says, "I have done nothing wrong."

"We'll see about that. What is your name? Let's see your *American* ID, and your *American* passport…" The cop again reaches for the phone and Will places it in the front pocket of his jeans just far enough that it won't fall out. He hopes Clayton can still hear him.

The cop throws Will a dirty look. "Ay! You think I won't take it from you there?"

"I think you'll have a tough time getting it from there."

"Little prick. ID, now!"

Will reaches around to his back pocket and produces his wallet. He slowly opens it and shows his Virginia driver's license to the irritated cop. The cop is unimpressed.

"And your passport?"

"It's in my room."

"Ok. What are you doing here, Mr. Graham? This is a crime scene and you have just become a suspect…unless you can convince me otherwise."

"I'd like to know how I'm a suspect. Given the victim over there, I should be covered in blood."

Another cop, one with a detective badge, joins them. The two Italians converse quickly, leaving Will out in the cold. Will observes another detective, a woman, dark-haired, slim, and rather attractive though she wears no make-up, not even lipstick.

The woman pauses and halts in her tracks as she approaches the other two. She looks to Will and back to her companions. Will's Italian is not good enough to follow the rapid conversation but he can tell it is not good. There seems to be some discussion about what exactly to do with him.

The woman joins the discussion, nodding at Will as she speaks. She pulls out her phone and appears to be looking up something. Will decides to use the opportunity to take Clayton's call.

"Dr. Clayton? You still there?"

"Oh yeah…" comes Clayton's voice, "It would seem I've caught you at a bad time."

Will finds the unexpected humor welcome and somehow appropriate. "Did you catch enough to know what is going on?"

"I think so. Where are the cops now?"

"About fifteen feet away from me, deciding what to do, I guess."

"Where are you?" Clayton asks.

Will gives him the location and explains that he walked there from his room. He waits for a reprimand that doesn't come. Instead, Clayton says, "I can be there in less than a half hour…"

"Oh, wait, hold on a sec…" Will watches the cops advance toward him.

"We think we would like you to take a little ride with us back to the precinct. We can talk there." The first cop says.

"Who are you talking to? Didn't he tell you to give him your phone?" The other cop, the detective, says as he reaches for the phone at Will's ear. Will steps back keeping the phone where it is.

"Will?" Clayton's use of his given name causes Will to smile for a second. Hearing it from him seems perfectly natural, as though Clayton has always addressed him this way. "Is there anything I can do to mitigate circumstances in a professional capacity?" Clayton says.

"You might, yes. What did you have in mind?"

"Tell them you have your psychiatrist on the line. Leave the rest to me."

"I don't have much of a choice do I?"

"Not really, but it's your call." Clayton's voice is calming and unhurried. Will instinctively trusts this voice.

Will offers up his phone to the detective. "It's my psychiatrist. I think you should talk to him. Would you do that, please?"

The detective takes the phone from Will's hand, keeping an eye on him as he speaks into the receiver. The conversation is in Italian, so Will looks around while the detective speaks to Clayton. Will notices the woman detective observing him while stealing glances at her phone. Will decides this is probably not a good thing. If he could kick himself, he would have done so several times by now.

The detective shuffles back over to Will. He hands Will his phone, almost kindly. "Detective D'Angelo will escort you to the van over there. You can wait with her until your psychiatrist arrives. He says he can be here in about twenty minutes. You should have said you were under supervised care."

Will wonders what Clayton said to him. He quickly decides he does not care so long as he can avoid a trip to the precinct to answer unwanted questions. D'Angelo motions for Will to follow her. She leads him away from the scene and over to the police van.

"So, you like crime scenes do you? I like them so much I follow the cases of American killers, too. America has a lot of serial killers." She says; her accent thick and her voice like syrup.

Will looks blandly at her and looks away. He is not going to have a conversation with her. But D'Angelo is not deterred by Will's lack of response.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Graham. Would you like to tell me what you were doing here at my crime scene?" She walks to stand in front of Will, looks directly into Will's eyes. She is clearly the subordinate here, but Will sees no point in antagonizing her. Will averts his eyes from her gaze, focusing on the scene in the distance but not before noticing the probing brown eyes beneath thick lashes.

“No, I would not.” He says, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Who sent you?”

“Nobody *sent* me.”

“What are you doing here in Florence?”

“I would rather wait until my psychiatrist arrives.”

“Of course. Being under a doctor’s care must be very familiar to you.”

Will winces but remains quiet. The minutes pass slowly and Will feels her gaze even as he steadfastly looks across the yard. The scene swarms with people and Will feels the tug of D”Angelo’s presence at his side. She resents having to stand here with him. She would rather be at the scene.

“You saw everything didn’t you?” she asks.

Will does not answer. He shifts his weight, rolls his shoulders. He checks his watch. It has been close to twenty minutes already.

“Tell me what you think.” She prods him with her voice. “What did you see?”

Will looks at her sideways. She is looking up at the night sky, her fingers play with the necklace at her throat. The gleam of a silver cross catches the light of the street lamp and the glow of the lights from the crime scene. She’s Italian; of course she is wearing a crucifix. He feels her eyes upon him again.

“I’ll keep what you say between us.” she says. “What are you looking for?”

“I think my psychiatrist is here.” Will says.

Will watches a burgundy Mercedes pull up; a very classy coupe. Clayton emerges from the vehicle after shutting off the ignition. He is wearing loafers without socks, jeans, and a black Polo shirt. He walks briskly toward Will and D’Angelo.

He offers his hand and she takes it, dropping it almost instantly. D’Angelo stares him up and down. Clayton ignores her and turns to Will. “Hey, I’m so glad I got a hold of you. You don’t remember how you got here, do you?”

Will understands immediately that he should agree. He rolls his eyes as though thinking and then shakes his head.

“You…are *his* psychiatrist?” D’Angelo asks, looking first at Clayton, then back to Will. Her eyebrows furrow in a way that suggest she is more than a little doubtful.

“What else would I be?” Clayton smiles at her, thumbs in his belt loops and head cocked to one side. Will stands quietly, tongue between his teeth so he doesn’t smile at Clayton’s handling of the detective.

She opens her mouth to speak, but is interrupted by her partner, the detective who had talked to Clayton earlier. He takes Clayton's outstretched hand and shakes it vigorously. "Buonasera!" he says.

"Detective Ruggerio." Clayton says. It is clear the two men know each other. Will does not miss the roll of D'Angelo's eyes or the tightness around her mouth.

"Dr. Clayton. How good to see you again. So, Mr. Graham is your patient?" He takes Clayton's arm and begins to lead him away from the van, and D'Angelo. Will sees her stiffen and hears the unmistakable sigh of irritation at being left out. Will figures being a woman detective in Italy must be challenging if not incredibly frustrating.

The rest of Clayton's conversation with the detective is in Italian. Clayton smiles and nods and the two of them walk a little further away. After a few moments, the two men are shaking hands again and Will notices that Clayton has fished his wallet from his jeans and slipped something to the detective who has palmed it quickly, his hand disappearing into the inside of his blazer.

Clayton and Ruggerio rejoin Will and the clearly annoyed D'Angelo back at the van. Clayton gives D'Angelo a cursory nod and looks to Will. Ruggerio's hands smooth his jacket as he also looks at Will.

"You are free to go, Mr. Graham. Let's be more careful about our meds in the future. Your doctor states your change of medication has caused you some disorientation." Ruggerio says.

Will runs his hand through his hair absently. "I suppose that's one way of putting it." Will looks to Clayton then back to Ruggerio. "I apologize for my intrusion…"

"Forget it, this time. Don't let me see you poking around crime scenes again. This isn't the U.S., or the FBI." Ruggerio turns to Clayton. "Take him out of here and get his meds straight. I've got work to do and this is going to be a long night…"

Ruggerio looks to D'Angelo. "What are you waiting for? Let's go."

D'Angelo takes one more long and penetrating look at Clayton and Will before turning on her heels and falling in with Ruggerio. Clayton watches them for a couple seconds.

Clayton glances at his watch. "Well, it's nearly ten, did you eat today?"

Will is caught off-guard by the question. He tries to remember when he last ate something.

"You didn't, did you?" Clayton shakes his head. "I know a place near here. We can get something and you can tell me about your adventure this evening. How about that?"

Will concedes he owes Clayton and was planning on talking to him anyway. He is not tired even though the hour is late and he could definitely eat something. As they climb into Clayton's car, Will asks, "Did you bribe him just now?"

"Sure did. That's how we do business, at least until we don't. I'm sure you can appreciate that if there is a next time, money will not do the trick."

"How much…" Will pauses, considering the awkwardness of the situation.

"Don't worry about it. I'll put it on your bill if it makes you feel better." Clayton flashes another of his signature smiles. Will feels his lips curl into a smile as he clicks his safety belt into place. His sigh this time is not so much in resignation as it is relief.

Chapter End Notes

Dr. Clayton's offices are in Florence. He lives in Fiesole, a small town north east of Florence located in the hills so that you can actually look down on the entire city of Florence. Fiesole is beautiful and even has ruins and a museum. It is less than ten miles from Florence in Tuscany.

Will's temporary residence is southwest of Clayton's residence. The crime scene is located off the west bank of the Arno near the Palazzo Pitti.

Firenze is Italian for Florence

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Your empathy operates on a level beyond anything I have encountered. If you essentially can become these killers, see things the way they do then you allow yourself to be transformed by your own empathy. And you do it knowing full well how traumatic it is for you to do so."
> "I did, yes." Will says feeling vaguely annoyed by Clayton's scolding.
> "And despite how damaging it is to your mind, you did it again this evening." Clayton ignores the twisting of lips and the blank stare.
> "Yes." Hands open in a helpless gesture as Will reclines further into his seat. Will wonders how Clayton will feel when Will tells him that this evening's crime scene did not bother him at all. He empathized with the killer; he did not sympathize with the victim.

____________________Chapter 3_______________________

Will and Dr. Clayton establish some boundaries.

Less than an hour later, Will sits across from Clayton in downtown Florence. They are dining al fresco, and though the daytime crowds have thinned considerably, flocks of tourists still pass them by eating gelato and sipping cappuccino.

Clayton is finishing off his veal Piccata while Will stares at his empty plate of shrimp scampi. He barely remembers eating it. He had somehow managed to fill his empty stomach without wolfing down the entire meal in one gulp. He tells himself he has to stop skipping meals. He pours himself a few swallows from the bottle of Pinot Grigio and offers the remainder to Clayton. Clayton nods as Will empties the wine into his glass.

Will knows their conversation about Italian cuisine and wine has run its course. Any second now, Clayton will start grilling him about this evening. Will does not want to talk about it, but he knows he must. He had recorded himself for Clayton's benefit, but is now reconsidering if he should share his methods with his psychiatrist. And Clayton is his psychiatrist. The events of this evening have pretty much sealed the deal.

And yet, Will still has his reservations. He has not discussed the recent events to anyone outside the close knit circle of his former colleagues, not one word. Freddy Lounds does not count. He feels like he is breaking some confidence, some secret oath in revealing the details of this nightmare that has eclipsed everything else in his life to an outsider. Will does not remember being so indecisive and he does not like how often he finds himself second guessing his own decisions.

Clayton has been watching Will stare into his wine glass. He feels the anxiety coming off Will in waves as he weighs and ponders what he is about to discuss. He knows he must be careful with Graham so that their conversation does not become an interrogation, or at least feel that way to his patient.

“I’m going to order some coffee since I have to drive back to Fiesole, but I understand if you don’t want to be up all night.”

“Fiesole is not that far. Why would you order coffee? It’s nearly eleven now.”

“Because I’m not leaving yet. And neither are you.” Clayton leans back in his chair and pushes his plate away.

“No, I guess I’m not. I’ll have coffee, too.” Will swirls his wine around, watching the pale liquid catch the light from the scented candle. “Where would you like to begin?”

“With the most obvious question. But, Will, we’re just having a conversation. This is not a formal session. I am not taking notes; we just shared a pleasant meal…”

“You just bribed a cop to scuttle me away from a crime scene…” Will says, like it happened every day.

“I probably just saved your ass from a visit to a sanitarium. You can’t be doing this. You at least have to tell me what is going on. What were you doing there?”

Will places his hands on the table, folds them together and hangs his head. Clayton is right about the sanitarium. He’d have been lucky with a seventy-two hour observation and plane ticket home. And to top it off, as far as Will had been able to tell, no organs had been missing from the victim. The gutting had left the organs to spill out all over the ground, but Will is certain no trophies had been taken. The man had been left more or less whole to meet his maker, albeit without the original wrapping intact. Clayton is waiting for an answer.

“You read my file, didn’t you? Then you know what I was doing there.” Will stares at his napkin, at the stains upon the white crumpled surface. His mind is still at the crime scene…processing. Something about the wafer is familiar.

“All right. Why were you profiling *that* crime scene? You weren’t consulting, so what are you investigating…on your own?” Clayton holds up two fingers to the waiter who is clearing their plates. The waiter gathers up the clutter and asks if they want cappuccino. After checking with Will, Clayton nods.

“I am looking for a serial killer who fled the U.S. I needed to know if tonight’s homicide was one of his.”

“The Chesapeake Ripper.” Clayton pauses, and Will nods.

“You supplemented your reading.” Will says.

“Uh-huh.” Clayton asks, “Have the Italian authorities been alerted to this Ripper?”

“Yes and no. Not by me. The locals and Interpol have access to the FBI’s most wanted list same as in the states. Their databases will get an alert if anything they put in matches. I tracked him here, to Italy anyway. I am thinking he could be in Florence itself.”

“Why Florence?”

“I follow the evidence, analyze patterns, extrapolate, deduce. I have contacts with access to data bases, other agencies…”

“You must have some great contacts. That kind of digging is not cheap nor is it readily available to civilians. And you are not currently working for the FBI, are you?”

“No, I’m not. You read I am on indefinite leave, and without my salary. I have a private benefactor if you will.”

“This private benefactor knows about your uh, file?”

Will stifles a laugh. “Oh, Dr. Clayton, he’s one of those redacted names in the file. He considers me a perfect fit for the job and he won’t question the expense if that’s what you mean.”

“It wasn’t; but never mind. I guess you answered my question. Is the FBI still looking for the Ripper?”

“Not as actively as they were. As you’ve likely surmised, things got ugly, people made mistakes, and he managed to escape the country. The dust still hasn’t settled…”

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust… God is beyond measure in wonton malice and matchless in his irony, Will.

“This is personal, isn’t it?” Clayton asks thinking of the wound Graham sustained in the attempt.

“For me or for my benefactor?”

“Probably both of you. The Ripper did something to him and he ripped your stomach open, didn’t he? Did you approach the benefactor, or did he approach you?”

“We have a mutual interest in catching the Ripper.” Will agrees, as he keeps his eyes trained on the greasy napkins and table. “My benefactor does not want to work with the FBI.”

“What is it he hired you to do, exactly?” Clayton realizes this smacks of a private vendetta.

“I don’t think that information is relevant to my therapy.” Will glances up to see the waiter approaching balancing the tray on his fingertips.

“Really. And I don’t think I should let you decide what is relevant to your therapy. You are aware of the concept of confidentiality.” Clayton removes his hands from the table so the waiter can serve their cappuccinos. Both men fall silent until the waiter has finished and walked away.

Clayton lifts his cup to his nose and sniffs at the generous dusting of cinnamon on the froth. “Will, why are you reluctant to be honest with me?”

“Withholding things is not the same as lying, Dr. Clayton.”

Clayton chuckles and shakes his head, “Splitting hairs now, huh? I did not accuse you of lying. Lying is specific, dishonesty can take many forms. And we were doing so well.” Clayton sips at his beverage and looks out into the street.

Will rubs at his face. Clayton is right, of course, but Clayton is also blissfully ignorant of this twisted tale of torture and death. Explaining any one part of it will only lead to explaining more, and then more. Will looks at Clayton as he watches the people walking past. Will is aware Clayton is giving him time to rethink his position.

Will is also aware that this young doctor is woefully unacquainted with the world Will exists in. He has probably treated some sick and deranged people, but Will is certain that nothing Clayton has encountered so far could possibly prepare him for the multiple pathologies presented by the Vergers, Hobbs, Gideon, Lecter, or even Will himself. Will does not even know where he would begin should he begin.

Will shifts his feet beneath the table. What he needs is to get out of his own head. He needs to throw his ball of crazy against a solid and trustworthy wall, one that won't crumble with the first salvo, or the subsequent ones. He feels like Clayton could be this wall.

Clayton may be innocent, but he is strong minded and smart. Will can sense that. Will was innocent once, too. But once those scales fall from Clayton's eyes he will never see the world, or Will, the same way again. Bringing Clayton into Will's vortex of depravity and dysfunction will shatter his innocence. Will can't protect him and Will does not know if he can live with that. But for now, they are just talking.

"Dr. Clayton." Will says as he stares into his cup.

"Mr. Graham." Clayton says giving Will his full attention and gracing him with another of his smiles. There is so much confidence in that smile. Will hopes that confidence is as warranted as he wants to believe it is.

Will grins at Clayton despite the mad thoughts running around his head. Will thinks he has smiled more at this table this evening than he has in months and the thought scatters his remaining doubts about bringing Clayton into his confidence. Clayton will just have to agree to Will's terms.

"I have very good reasons for not disclosing certain things to you. There's a reason that file is redacted. And you have every reason to expect that I disclose the information regardless. I will make a deal with you." Quid pro quos always seem to appeal to psychiatrists…

"I'm listening." Clayton says as his fingers trace the lip of his cup.

"I will answer all of your questions…eventually. There has to be an order, a sequence. You will not be able to digest all of it at once. I hardly know where to start."

"The beginning is where I would start. Your first contact with the Ripper."

"Well, that was a complicated encounter and requires context. You should know a little more about me first. My benefactor came late to the party so, this question about him…it can wait, trust me."

Clayton looks at Will in silence for a long moment. He knows Graham's offer is genuine. At his core, Graham is a decent and honorable man. But, a lot has happened to him and Clayton recognizes that qualities like decency and honor have been cast aside or at least suspended occasionally to allow him to do his job, and he has had to live with his actions. Clayton decides that allowing Graham to create his own framework will help him to recall, restructure, and re-evaluate the events that have led him here. This approach will also foster the trust Clayton knows is so difficult for Graham to give.

"I do trust you, Will. Like I said before, in my office, I know you do not want to be here…in therapy, but you understand that you need some help. I need to know what you have been through so that together, we can ascertain what it is that you need and…if I am qualified to provide it. So, I accept your judgment about how to present information to me. This is good, establishing boundaries and rules. Since I have no idea what the sequence should be, I will understand if you choose not to answer a question. I will write it down and save it for another time. Sound fair?"

"So far, so good." Will feels like a child making deals with his dad, but he does need to control the flow of information somehow. Once Clayton begins to understand the horrible scope of the devastated landscape Will has to describe to him, Will is confident that Clayton will appreciate his approach. "Any burning questions right now?"

"Since it is late, and I did say this was not a formal session, I have two questions for you this evening, then, I'll take you to your place."

"Ok."

"First question, which may have follow up questions, and they don't count because they would be related. Right?" A hint of a smile tugs at Clayton's lips. His tone is serious, but his eyes are playful, seeking confirmation from Will while teasing him at the same time.

Will smiles broadly, laughs and ducks his head. Conversation with Clayton doesn't feel like the chore it often is, the onerous task he must engage in to keep up the appearance of being socialized. There is no mouse and no cat. Talking with Clayton is actually pleasant. He settles in his chair and faces Clayton once again.

"As long as the questions are intended to clarify; they don't count." Will says evenly. "Carefully covering your bases, aren't you, doctor?"

"With you? Absolutely. I get the feeling you have played this game many times, and played it well."

"Are we playing a game?"

"For most of my patients, therapy is not a game. But for you…yes, it is very much a game. Your knowledge base about psychology is so vast yet your interaction with the psychiatric community has been so…clumsy I think is the word I would use, that you compulsively pick apart the process and undermine the therapist, and ultimately the therapy."

"Ouch." Will says. "You don't mince words do you?"

"Not with you. You don't strike me as the type who wants or needs ice cream with his cake."

"No, I don't. I don't really like cake."

"You are very meat and potatoes." Clayton lifts his head and his smile disappears. "I can only imagine how many times you have been poked and prodded in the patient's chair. I would be lying if I told you I did not find you fascinating, but I have no intention of publishing any papers about you. I only need to get inside your head as a healer."

"I appreciate the words, I really do."

"But you've been screwed before, I get it. I know of Dr. Chilton and his methods. I've actually met him. His name was one of the few in the file if you were wondering, but I know he works in the

Baltimore area and he would have been drawn to you like a bee to honey. Even I wouldn't let that moron near my head."

If Will didn't already like Clayton, he did now. Unfortunately, Chilton was not the psychiatrist whose screwing had caused Will to become unhinged. The topic of Lecter was indefinitely on hold. Will turns his attention back to Clayton.

"I agree Chilton shouldn't be allowed anywhere near living things. The man can wilt a flower with his charm alone. And I am not surprised you did a little homework." Will pauses, wondering how much homework Clayton has had time for. His failure to mention Chilton's brief notoriety as the Chesapeake Ripper is strange.

"I believe you mean well, Dr. Clayton. I wouldn't be sitting here otherwise. Rest assured I do not think that your intentions are…self-aggrandizing. "

"Even though I've written exclusively about empathy? I'm sure you did some homework, too."

Will smiles. "Empathy with animals. Your saving grace."

Clayton allows a broad grin to spread across his face. He should have recognized Graham would have an affinity for pets. He could revisit that topic later. He found his thoughts meandering when he spoke with Graham and he was not used to allowing his patients so much latitude at this stage. He did want to make certain that Graham understood his intentions and expectations regarding his tenure as his attending therapist.

"Hopefully, I have more than one saving grace with you. I have not, and I will not lie to you. I will never engage in any treatment without your knowledge or consent. My primary goals at this stage of your therapy are to establish boundaries, which we are doing, and to create a climate of trust. Without those two things, nothing else we do will be productive."

"Can I get that in writing?" Will says with a straight face.

Clayton laughs again. It is a throaty warm sound and Will decides he enjoys making Clayton laugh. Clayton gulps down the last of his cappuccino. "I like you, Will, despite yourself. I'll have it framed if you want."

"Oh, just notarized will be sufficient." Will says as Clayton chuckles again. Will turns his cup around on the saucer a few times. "Ok. We cleared the air, so get on with your question. I'd like to get back sometime tonight."

"I want to understand how your empathy works. Use tonight's crime scene as a specific example. How do you know, without any forensic evidence to speak of, how can you possibly know if the homicide you looked at earlier is or is not *your* killer?"

"It's that gift of pure empathy you read about in the file. I can think like the killer."

"Yes, that would be the short answer. How does that work at a crime scene? How does it help you think like someone?"

"You did read the file?" Wills asks again. "How does it say I do it?"

“The file gives a very generic description; and it was written by someone who can only guess how your mind works. Your empathy operates on a level beyond anything I have encountered. If you essentially can become these killers, see things the way they do then you allow yourself to be transformed by your own empathy. And you do it knowing full well how traumatic it is for you to do so.”

“I did, yes.” Will says feeling vaguely annoyed by Clayton’s scolding.

“And despite how damaging it is to your mind, you did it again this evening.” Clayton ignores the twisting of lips and the blank stare.

“Yes.” Hands open in a helpless gesture as Will reclines further into his seat. Will wonders how Clayton will feel when Will tells him that this evening’s crime scene did not bother him at all. He empathized with the killer; he did not sympathize with the victim.

“Was it worth it? Is the homicide this evening the work of your Ripper?”

“No. It is someone else. Probably a one-time thing. This was…very specific rage directed at an individual in a very specific way.”

“I don’t understand. Every murder is specific, isn’t it? How do you see the killer in the method?”

Clayton is asking all the right questions. He demonstrates an intuitive logic toward forensic analysis. Will is not surprised that Clayton is intuitive and intelligent. He does not doubt that Clayton is far more intuitive and intelligent than he lets on. Will attributes this to modesty rather than manipulation. Although, Will knows that Clayton must be capable of that, too.

“I’ll try to explain. Even to someone without the arguable benefits of my gift, there are certain attributes of any crime that point to motive, method, and means. A trained profiler can read these attributes, these accidental or not so accidental mementoes like personality traits…and they are as revealing as the physical evidence from the lab.”

“But attributes are more open to interpretation than the evidence in the lab.”

“Very much so. You understand what a killer’s signature is?”

“Yes. It’s his peculiar thing. Something he compulsively does, each and every time.”

“And signatures can be faked, or copied. I have been able so far to tell the difference.”

“No wonder you are such an asset. The FBI’s bloodhound. You still haven’t explained how you do it. You are describing standard procedures.”

Will nods; pushes his napkin around the table. “Many profilers are instinctive and very good at their jobs. I don’t just identify his signature, I understand it, too. Understand its expression within the context of the crime; see the intended meaning…the irony or the beauty of it. See the entire scene, the tableau as it were, as the work of art or theatre he means it to be.” Will swallows, but his throat is dry. He quickly locates his glass of melted ice and takes a gulp.

“You are able to reimagine the crime. You can re-enact every detail. You become the killer for a few minutes.” Clayton is staring at Will across the table. He is chilled by thought that this seemingly disconnected and aloof young man has essentially killed many, many times and in many,

many cruel and inventive ways. Never mind that the killing was all in his head. Yet, here he sits quietly describing his ability as though discussing a composition. In a way, Clayton supposes he is.

“Did you see the body this evening?” Will asks him abruptly.

“No… The area was all blocked off by the time I arrived. You must have watched them cover everything up.”

“I guess I did. I was looking, but I was lost in my own thoughts.” Will stares into his empty cup. “Anyway, it’s probably better that you didn’t actually see it. That sort of thing really sticks with you.”

Clayton nods in agreement. Will Graham is testament enough to that statement. “If I had seen the body, seen it as you do; what would I have seen?”

“How did I know it wasn’t the Ripper? It didn’t fit the profile I already have of him. This murder was done by someone with deeply religious convictions despite their act of murder. The killer may have believed he was acting in God’s name. At any rate, it was done in deference to God. The Ripper emulates God, is adept at evoking the idea of God, but he operates independent from God, never as a supplicant.”

I don’t pray. I’ve not been bothered by any considerations of deity other than to recognize my own modest actions pale beside those of god.

“You know him very well, don’t you? How many crime scenes of his did you…profile?”

Will meets Clayton’s eyes. “Too many.” Will knows the file contains no names. Neither does it disclose Hannibal Lecter’s profession or hobbies… Will decides that information can also wait. He also decides to volunteer his recording.

“I did record myself tonight. I haven’t had a chance to play it back…”

“You recorded your profiling routine?” Clayton asks leaning forward.

Will likes the term routine. He had never thought of his ability as a routine, but the process was the same every time; a routine he performed as compulsively as any other disorder.

“Yeah, it’s saved on my phone.” Will pauses, “Would you like me to send it to you or wait?”

“Good question. What do you want to do?”

“I think listening to it in your office would be best. Is tomorrow ok? I know I haven’t set up any regular appointments.”

“In your case, I am amenable to a more fluid arrangement. We can schedule a regular weekly session, but I will accommodate you as my calendar allows should that be insufficient.

“Very gracious of you.”

“You suspect my motives, don’t you?”

“Can’t help it. But that’s on me, not you. I am fine with that arrangement. Seems I have a history of unorthodox relationships with psychiatrists.” Will mentally kicks himself.

Clayton feels the alarm rising in Graham. Clayton figures something he just said has triggered it. He makes a mental note and does not comment. “If you want to come by my office tomorrow, four o’clock would work. My last appointment is at three.” Clayton leans in a little closer. “You won’t erase it, or otherwise…lose it between now and tomorrow?”

“Here, I’ll send it now. You promise not to listen until I arrive. Deal?”

“Deal. And thank you, Will.”

Will shrugs off the sudden warmth Clayton’s voice engenders. “What is your other question? That is, if I have sufficiently answered your first question.”

Clayton glances at his watch. “This should be an easy one. What do you think you need from me?”

“I’ll give you a basic answer for now. My fear of failure as you astutely called it; is the main reason for seeking your services. My various neuroses and conditions can cause periods of instability. I can’t afford to become unstable while I work in a foreign country. I need…a counterweight, an anchor, and you have agreed to be my anchor.”

“That is very basic.” Clayton agrees. “But, I think you are being as honest as you can, for now.”

Will returns his gaze but says nothing. His challenge is a gentle one, but a challenge nonetheless. Clayton is satisfied with the progress this evening.

“I guess we’re done here, if you are ready to go. And thank you for a very interesting evening.”

Will rubs his nose and pushes up his glasses. “It was educational wasn’t it?”

“Oh, I just got my feet wet tonight. I imagine I’ll be swimming in your pool soon enough.”

Clayton smiles and walks to the bar where the register and their waiter await. The restaurant is clearly empty and the kitchen is dark.

“Bring your life jacket.” Will mutters as he watches Clayton settle up with the waiter.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal tilts his chin up as he walks, Du Maurier walks beside him and he takes her arm in his. He allows the aroma of her perfume to infiltrate his senses and he knows instantly what she is celebrating today. He is touched and somewhat surprised that she would choose to commemorate this particular anniversary after all this time.
> “You were wearing that same fragrance when we met. You wore it later…in the guest house.”
> “And I wore it every day thereafter.” Du Maurier says; her voice more seductive than usual.
> “Until the day you did not.” The words are spoken softly, almost wistfully, if one did not know him better.
> Du Maurier does know him better and marvels at how convincing he is.

__________________________Chapter 4___________________________

Hannibal and Bedelia have a date by the fountain. Will shows Dr. Clayton how an empathic profiler sees a crime scene.

The Fountain of Neptune is not as grand as it seems in photographs, yet Bedelia Du Maurier sits enrapt of the smooth marble figures surrounding her, classically nude, wet and perfect as they have been for centuries. She sips at her iced coffee in the Piazza della Signoria, and considers feeding the pigeons the rest of her pastry, but decides her fingers will get sticky and she has no more napkins.

"Dr. Du Maurier, the Tuscan sun agrees with you." A familiar voice speaks to her as his shadow covers her discarded indulgence.

Bedelia lifts her head so she can peer at Hannibal Lecter from beneath the stone washed grey sun hat that sits primly but fashionably to the side. Her blonde hair sweeps her shoulders and tumbles down her back as she leans away from the glare of afternoon sun to have a better look. Hannibal's person suit is in fine form today. He hardly looks like the man he was a year ago.

The flaxen locks are now brown, a honey brown that compliments his complexion, bronzed by the sun. He is trimmer though his upper body swells with the muscle concealed beneath the crisp white shirt and pale yellow linen blazer, perfectly pressed as are the cocoa colored trousers that fit snugly accentuating equally muscular legs. His expression however, is unreadable as always. The sunglasses do not help.

Hannibal never tires of Du Maurier's mannequin like facial expressions. She presents as a fragile porcelain doll but she is anything but. Her eyes sweep over him and Hannibal notices her appraisal is favorable. Du Maurier is nothing if not a sensualist, very much like himself.

"How nice to see you, Hannibal, or should I say, Victor. The sun appears to agree with you, as well. Have you taken to swimming outside?"

"I have. The climate this time of year warms the swimming pool to the perfect temperature. And of course, the aroma of a gym cannot compare to my botanical garden. I trust you find your current residence as much a sanctuary as I find mine?"

"Sanctuary is a curious choice of metaphor for a home."

"Could another word be more appropriate?"

"Not at all. Your choice suggests retreat. Have you finally retreated, Hannibal?"

"We have both retreated from the world we knew and created a new life here. My home has become a sanctuary of sorts, hasn't yours?"

"Sanctuary is derived from *sanctuarium* and is a place or container for keeping things. Are you keeping things in or keeping things out?"

"An interesting question. One we can discuss over dinner. Do we have a reservation today?"

"Our reservation is for four o'clock. I know you prefer evening meals, and I appreciate that you arranged your schedule to accommodate mine. We have plenty of time to walk to Via Ghebellina."

"Ah, an exquisite choice. I have not been to Enotecha Pinchiorri since we arrived. Is this a special occasion?"

"An anniversary of sorts. Can you guess which one?"

"There are so many. Let me think."

Hannibal tilts his chin up as he walks, Du Maurier walks beside him and he takes her arm in his. He allows the aroma of her perfume to infiltrate his senses and he knows instantly what she is celebrating today. He is touched and somewhat surprised that she would choose to commemorate this particular anniversary after all this time.

"You were wearing that same fragrance when we met. You wore it later…in the guest house."

"And I wore it every day thereafter." Du Maurier says; her voice more seductive than usual.

"Until the day you did not." The words are spoken softly, almost wistfully, if one did not know him better.

Du Maurier does know him better and marvels at how convincing he is.

"Well, that is an anniversary of another kind. I have rediscovered a certain…fondness for this fragrance and…" there is a tremulous quiver in the exhale of her breath, "…for the memories it summons."

Hannibal is quiet. He wonders what prompted her rediscovery and her fondness. He is certain she will tell him over dinner, whether she intends to, or not. In the meantime, they will enjoy wine from one of the finest cellars in Europe. He lifts her hand to his lips as they walk arm in arm, just another lovely couple in a lovely Tuscan city, on a lovely summer day.

* * *

Wills sits with one leg leaning against the coffee table in Clayton's office. He is wearing fresh clothes today, jeans again and a thin pin striped lavender and white shirt. He slept in this morning, and feels better for it. He has even eaten lunch today. He doesn't want to be chided by Clayton, even though he sort of likes it.

Clayton is dressed casually professional, beige trousers, slim leather belt, pea green shirt and a silk paisley tie complete the relaxed retro look he seems to embody quite effortlessly. Clayton showed his last patient the door several minutes ago. Clayton is telling his receptionist and the rest of his staff downstairs that they can leave for the day.

Clayton noticed Will's improved appearance immediately, but did not comment on it thinking it might embarrass him. Will seemed to have a confused reaction to kindness when it was extended and until Clayton can identify the reason for that, he prefers to keep compliments to a minimum. Will's expressive blue eyes give Clayton pause often enough as it is without having to worry about the other less than professional responses those eyes and that face arouse in him.

"Doesn't she usually work until six?" Will asks. "Don't they all?"

Clayton loosens his tie as he speaks, "Yes, but I don't know what to expect once we get into this. We will be discussing crime scenes and your involvement in them. I think privacy is warranted, don't you?"

"I guess so. I'm not really the usual day at the office sort of patient am I?" Will watches Clayton remove his tie; toss it across the leather chair behind his desk, and cross the room while unbuttoning the top buttons of his shirt. He has once again adjusted his attire to convey equivalence rather than disparity.

Clayton smiles and eases into the couch adjacent to Will's. He would like to sit beside Will but he knows Will is not ready for that much intimacy yet.

"What am I about to listen to?" Clayton has set his notepad and pen on the table, preferring to write his observations rather than record. He has always taken his own notes, finding that listening to recorded sessions is not only tedious but redundant. His impressions while the person is sitting in the room with him have proven much more reliable.

Will takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "I have just observed the scene, taking it in as any profiler would. I look at all the physical evidence before me." Will describes the scene to Clayton who remains silent the entire time.

"Ok." Clayton says, "I think I have a pretty good picture of the scene and the deceased. Now what happens?"

"I close my eyes and allow all the images to kind of rearrange themselves in my mind. It's like I am transported into another plane of existence. I remove the evidence of the crime piece by piece until I can visualize the crime from the beginning. At that point I can see the scene clean, as it was before the crime. "You have assumed the perspective of the killer."

"Yes. What you are about to listen to, is what I feel and see from that perspective." Will clicks a button on his phone and listens to a voice that he recognizes as his own, but he hears a tremor of excitement and satisfaction to it that Will does not recall having at the time. He does not dare look into Clayton's expectant face.

Clayton feels a shudder of anticipation as the sound of Will's voice fills the quiet of the room. Clayton is aware of nothing else as he listens to a killer speak through the mind of the man seated next to him.

He glances at Will. He is leaning forward, elbows on knees, chin on hands, his eyes closed. Clayton continues to watch him as he listens.

Clayton is astonished by both the casual disregard for life and by the preciseness of the violent imagery Will has chosen to employ in his description. Clayton realizes that the killer's intentions and feelings are being filtered through Will. There is eloquence in the narration. Will is translating for the killer, and in doing so, is elevating his act of violence to callous and sparse poetry. Will has given voice to the unspoken intent of the killer.

Clayton wonders if each memory haunts him. Clayton cannot imagine how many ghosts roam around his fortress, assaulting him even in his dreams.

"*This is my design…Ay! Como…*"

Will shuts off the phone. Clayton shakes himself into the present. "You didn't think about that, compose or edit that in any way?"

Will shakes his head. "I usually just think it to myself. I've only recorded myself once before, partly to see if I could talk out loud during… and partly to make sure that what I saw, what I felt was real."

"Do you still have that one?"

"No. I didn't want to keep it. It was a long time ago it seems…" Will drifts off into his head again. Time is something Will can never get back. So many things he would do differently given the chance…If he had known about Abigail, would he even be here now?

Should the universe contract, should time reverse…

"Will?" Clayton speaks gently and with a blink of his eyes, Will is back in the moment. "Do the killers leave once you let them in?"

"Leave?"

"Yeah, leave your head. Is your mind a revolving door or a repository?"

"I can think about several crime scenes and profiles at the same time. But, there's usually only one killer at a time…"

"You know that's not what I mean. Can you get them out or are they always with you once you let them in? Like the killer the other night…is he still in there?"

"No. Oh, no. I guess that would concern you."

"A little.

"Dr. Clayton, I only think like them, I do not become them." Will feels shame at his lie. His half-truth. Deceit has become so easy for him. But honesty, pure honesty is so difficult, and costly.

Adapt…evolve…become. You are becoming, Will…

"But you do." Clayton insists. "For a very short duration, your empathy…it allows you to assume their perspective. You speak in first person, Will. It's like a demonic possession."

"You're saying I need an exorcism now?" Will laughs. Clayton actually feels foolish.

"That did sound ridiculous, but you know what I mean. You knowingly adopt the persona. You identify so closely that even your narrative reflects the killer's mindset."

"His feelings; my vocabulary. I don't channel them like some medium with a crystal ball. What's the big deal?" The clipped retort spills out before Will can edit it.

Clayton has already resigned himself to ignoring Will's abrasive tone and paying attention to the actual words instead. This is how Will expresses himself and it is not going to change. It is who he is. One of Will's defense mechanisms is rudeness. It likely works most of the time.

"It's not like putting on a hat and then taking it off, right? I just listened to you talk as the killer, but you *see* it, too. You see it through his eyes; you act it out in your mind like an actor in a play only this is much more visceral. You can't tell me there isn't some residual…"

it harder imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing now that you've done it yourself?

"There is." Will says cutting him off. "I can empathize so completely that I have a difficult time differentiating my emotions from theirs."

"And has that always been the case, or just since the Ripper?"

"That's a curious question, Dr. Clayton."

"Questions are the expression of curiosity. I don't play softball, Will. I don't need to be a shrink to figure out whose ballpark you are playing in. Your empathy has always had an emotional cost attached to it, but it is the Ripper who has caused you to question yourself. Caused you to question who you are."

"You're not playing hardball either." Will manages a weak smile. "I've been subjected to much worse, believe me."

Clayton returns the smile. "At least you are playing ball. It's a start."

Clayton does not doubt Will has been subjected to much worse. After reading what Graham has been through, he has reached the conclusion that Will Graham is a surprisingly resourceful and resilient man. He is far from frail, either physically or mentally. If there is anything fragile about him, Clayton imagines it would be his soul.

"Will, you understand your own mind better than anyone else. You have survived this long on your own and you are resilient in light of what you have exposed yourself to. In spite of what has been done to you. In order for me to help, I need to separate what's been done with what naturally occurs."

Wills nods. Clayton makes a good point. "I get into the minds of killers as easily as I get into anyone's head. What I find, what I extrapolate with my empathy is ugly, dark, and though I used to feel repulsed and upset by it, my experience with the Ripper has changed me."

"What upsets you now?"

"That I can identify with the darkness. It frightens me that I understand it. There were events that triggered feelings and knowledge I didn't know I had, or refused to acknowledge. I don't know anymore."

"This is good. This is the reason you are here, isn't it?"

"Partly." Will looks around the room, his expression grim. "It is the reason from which all the other reasons spring."

"You've never allowed anyone to analyze you about this, have you?"

Will thinks the word *allow* is inaccurate, at best. He knows Clayton means in a professional capacity. In that context, he can freely omit Lecter.

"Never, except by Dr. Chilton. I know…Frederick of all people. But there were circumstances that caused me to make a deal. I agreed to be examined by him, take any and all the evaluations and tests he wanted in exchange for a favor."

"This was during your, uh, stay at the Baltimore State Hospital."

"My incarceration at the Hospital for the Criminally Insane. You can say it."

Clayton's eyes falter for a second but Will tracks his gaze and pulls him back into his sea of churning blue. Clayton licks his lips and presses on. Will can clearly engage when he wants to.

"What was the diagnosis?" Clayton maintains the eye contact with Will for as long as Will can stand it. Will drops his eyes, looks aside.

"We started some tests but we never finished. He never delivered on the favor. I was released soon after." Will picks at a stray fiber on the arm of the couch.

"So, any results were inconclusive?"

"Oh, results were very conclusive, for him." Will says with unrestrained sarcasm.

"This is one of those questions that can wait, huh?"

Will raises his eyebrows and nods his head. Memories of his sodium amytal induced session with Chilton flood his consciousness. Will remembers listening to music amidst a barrage of flashing light in Lecter's office. The vision spills into Clayton's office, superimposed over the blue walls and Berber carpet.

Hannibal is pressing a notebook into his hands. Will holds a pen awkwardly as he draws a clock, disoriented by the soft clicking sound of the light that flashes relentlessly into his retinas. Hannibal's face looms closer and thin soft lips touch his own. He feels warm moist breath as Hannibal speaks to him. Will lets the notebook slide from his fingers. He feels Hannibal's fingers slip over his scalp gently twining around locks of his hair.

Will opens his eyes, blinks several times.

Clayton is staring at him. "You weren't here just now, were you?"

Will shakes his head. "Repeat your question." He says simply. To his relief, Clayton lets his lapse of consciousness go without comment. He does notice that Clayton has written extensively in his notepad.

"When you profile a crime scene, you are essentially alone?" Clayton asks him.

We are, each of us alone without the other…

"Right. Everyone clears out so I can…do my thing…" Will rolls his arms in the air as though he has just finished a performance.

Clayton sees Will is trying to make light but his awareness of being different is painfully apparent. He must feel like a walking talking freak show even among his colleagues. A twinge tightens within Clayton's chest again as though the bitter smile on Will's face had sent it there.

Will feels the mist enveloping him again. The mist descends upon his fortress in a shroud of snowflakes. Will sits upright, his memory grasping at images from a dream. Mist and snowflakes, wolf and stag…

"Will?" Clayton's voice interrupts his thoughts. "Will…where did you go just now?"

"I uh…doesn't matter." The white stag leaping over him in a sea of snowflakes plays over in his mind joined by swirling glasses of wine in Lecter's office and the most recent missive from Jack while the crime scene of last night has been simmering just beneath all that. Something about the wafer…

Will's mind feels more scrambled than usual. His inability to profile Clayton is puzzling. Will pushes an errant lock of hair impatiently from his forehead. It falls back into his eyes almost immediately. Will makes a mental note to get a haircut. He wonders how long it will grow before he is annoyed enough to actually follow through.

Talking with Will makes Clayton feel like tossing the mental roadmap he had in mind for today out the window. It seems like they keep taking detours and Clayton gets the feeling that Will is light years ahead of him. He imagines Will processes a multitude of impressions, ideas, and memories all at once and is restricted by Clayton's ability to ask but one question at time. Will's responses cause Clayton to keep changing lanes and direction. He's not sure of the destination anymore.

“We’ve been talking a while. I need a break. Are you ok or have you had enough for today?”

Will looks at his watch, considers Clayton’s question. There is nowhere he has to be. He likes talking to Clayton. He likes being with Clayton which is a first. Will hasn’t particularly liked being with anyone in a while. He not only likes being with Clayton, he wants to be here. The alternative is going back to his place, alone. And he knows he does not want to do that.

Yet, he feels edgy. He does not want Clayton’s office to feel like a cage and though he has been comfortable with Clayton, he would not characterize his feelings as enjoyment, a break actually sounds good.

“It’s almost five thirty,” Will says, “I’ve had enough. I think I’ll get some air, call it a day.”

“Sounds good. I will leave my four o’clock open for you if that works for you.”

“It does.” Will does not associate therapy with daylight, but change has to be good.

“Can we talk tomorrow then?” Clayton asks, sounding hopeful.

“Sure. Maybe you should write your questions down first and then you wouldn’t get off track so easily.” Will smiles as he shuts the door behind him leaving Clayton reclining in his couch, fingers to lips deep in thought.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Du Maurier take their positions on the chess board while Will discovers his psychiatrist is also empathic. He's not sure if this is a good thing...

Will's thoughts are piling on top of each other and he walks around the room, his hands gesturing as quickly as the words flow. "I am not bombarded with images from you at all. In fact, you barely register. You're not… readable like other people."
"You can't profile me." Clayton says.
"No, I can't. It's like you have forts of your own." Will keeps his distance from Clayton's couch. Will senses that mist hovering nearby. It has been there the entire time, lingering just beyond his reach.

Chapter 5

Hannibal plays chess with Du Maurier and Will learns his psychiatrist also has empathy issues.

Hannibal wipes the rich rose colored satin napkin delicately across his sensitive lips savoring the luxuriousness of the sensation as the coating of wine disappears into the fabric. He notes he can barely see the stain upon the napkin. *Clever*, he thinks.

Du Maurier has just returned from the ladies' room and is ruffling through her sequined Versace clutch. Their decadent repast has already been cleared from the tastefully decorated table. Only the hand dipped candles, the amphora containing fragrant buds of sweet pea, and their crystal wine goblets remain. The placement of the pair of wine goblets upon the pale pink tablecloth reminds Hannibal of chess pieces facing off. Which pieces precisely, he is not sure.

As his eyes roam over Du Maurier's carefully drawn features, he supposes chess pieces are exactly what the two of them have become. And most of the other pieces have already been removed from the board. Of all the varied topics and couched innuendo the two of them have discussed, dissected and exchanged over their leisurely meal, none has provided Hannibal with a clue as to the source of her sudden desire to resuscitate their former partnership.

Except for the things left unspoken. Hannibal smiles at Du Maurier across the table as he lifts his goblet to his lips and silently thinks one word: *check.* She has exposed herself as Hannibal knew she would. The question remains if the exposure is deliberate or accidental.

One singular thing left unspoken screams volumes to Hannibal in its absence. The subject of one Will Graham has been curiously absent from conversation all afternoon. Du Maurier has not directly spoken of him, nor alluded to him. Her implied warnings, embedded in the metaphors that characterize her speech, regarding the disastrous consequences of Hannibal's unresolved and unrequited preoccupations with his former protégé are constant. She has picked at the scab left by Will's betrayal relentlessly. But Will has escaped mention today. A most telling omission considering she is usually unfailingly circumspect in their games of chess.

Hannibal thinks that perhaps the omission of Graham is deliberate. This is yet another method to assess the depths of his obsession, as she refers to Graham. She is far too familiar with Hannibal not to notice his frequent retreats into his memory palace and Hannibal has become annoyed of her knowing glances and half smiles. He is more annoyed with himself however. The ennui that has descended is all pervasive, even his appetite has been affected and that has never happened before.

Hannibal considers it is entirely possible that she has tired of pressing him on the matter and has decided to make amends by offering a reprieve from her constant scrutiny. She clearly desires to alter their current arrangement, to rekindle their former and more intimate arrangement. But to what end?

Du Maurier's handling of Hannibal is warm yet calculating in its seduction. And Hannibal has no doubts that this is a seduction. Her outfit is breathtaking, and she wears it flawlessly, shamelessly and sensually. She is a vision of sophistication, vulnerability, and loveliness. Her meticulously choreographed performance this afternoon has included literature, poetry, opera, even history but she has deftly abjured from her usual recriminations. Usually, Du Maurier cannot resist veering into Hannibal's sacred temple where his beloved Will resides.

Hannibal cannot believe she has given up. It is possible she has grown tired of competing with a memory for Hannibal's attention. If she is sincere about rediscovering her latent fondness and the clearly romantic aspirations she has been intimating all afternoon, avoiding the topic of Will Graham would be in her best interest. Of all the things Du Maurier has become, she remains a woman. His interest in Graham must…Hannibal nearly lets slip a smile…drive her nuts.

Hannibal had lost tabs on Will some time ago. Will had been released from the psychiatric care facility, observations and evaluations had been imposed by the FBI, but ultimately even their hold on Graham had scattered like insects under the microscope of official scrutiny. His residence in Wolf Trap was still registered in his name, taxes paid, utilities and grounds cared for, but Graham himself had slid off the grid, his whereabouts unknown.

That Jack had not bled to death had been a surprise to Hannibal. Death had come knocking and Jack must have decided something was worth living for. Jack Crawford was busily rehabilitating his career, but he might have had enough remaining clout to get Will into some sort of protective custody arrangement, to keep him close. To keep him *safe*. Then again, Uncle Jack might very well be as mystified as to Will's whereabouts as Hannibal.

Jack had recovered in time to bury his dear departed Bella earlier this year. Will Graham had not attended her funeral. How ironic that Hannibal had ended up in the very place Jack had wanted to take Bella before she succumbed to her cancer. God could be very cruel.

But where was Will? His precious Will might have become unraveled in the wake of the devastating aftermath of their last encounter. So many pieces to pick up from the shattered tea cup.

The image of Will; bloodied and pale, his body racked with sobs, his wonderful beautiful mind unable to absorb the shock of the carnage wrought by Hannibal's own hand and his own misguided betrayal was a recurring and bittersweet memory. A shameful waste of what could have been. And yet, Hannibal held out hope that his pupil could still learn from his hard won survival lesson.

One thing was perfectly clear to Hannibal. Du Maurier believed that Hannibal's interest in Will Graham was unwise; that his obsession with Graham would be his undoing. But the undoing would be Will's and it was Hannibal's to relish, not hers. Will held the promise of a perfect ruination, an opportunity for destruction, and out of that destruction; creation, another becoming. He had torn Will down before. It was necessary to break him again so his instincts, urges and true nature could at last be untethered from his teetering pillar of morality, a tether he clung to even as it unraveled in his hands.

Hannibal imagined Will, his Will, finally transformed through this last and most brutal fall from grace; emerging as either a worthy adversary, exquisite and awful in his majesty or a companion, equally exquisite and awful. If an adversary Hannibal would see Will vanquished, devoured, and enshrined. But, as a companion, and this Hannibal wanted above all else…Will would be loved as Hannibal had loved no other.

Du Maurier sits observing Hannibal closely, allows her eyes to soften as she rolls the magnificent ruby encrusted gold ring around her slender finger.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she says softly, leaning forward just a little to infer deference.

Hannibal smiles slowly as he gestures to the nearly empty wine goblets. "I was considering another bottle; or perhaps cognac if you prefer?"

"It's a bit warm for cognac, but…" Du Maurier's perfectly French manicured nails circle the rim of her goblet, "another bottle of this sublime chianti would be most welcome, beside a pool and a garden?"

"You have somehow managed to fit a swimsuit in there?" He nods at the clutch on the table.

"I should think a suit superfluous at this juncture." she purrs.

Hannibal is amused by the double entendre and intrigued by the flirting. He is happy to extend their game of chess a little longer, especially if it provides such an enjoyable distraction. Distraction is clearly Du Maurier's game, but precisely what is he being distracted from?

"Shall I call a cab?" Hannibal says motioning for the waiter standing attentively nearby.

Du Maurier signs the tab and gracefully slides from beneath the table, sundress slipping over sensuously shaped thighs and calves. Du Maurier is counting on her charms. She has spent many hours at the gym and the spa refining her assets. She is certain Hannibal will not refuse such an appetizing offering of flesh to satiate his carnal desires.

This evening could be the first of many, a declaration of her willingness to resume a life together, a future, freed of their respective pasts if only Hannibal will let his past fade away. She cannot allow Hannibal to indulge his sentimental notions about his obsession, no matter how unspeakably beautiful and damaged he is. To allow Hannibal a consummation of this dangerous liaison will mean the end for at least one of them, perhaps both. Du Maurier would prefer Hannibal at her side, but she wants her Hannibal, not the one still pining for Will Graham.

Will arrives to his four o'clock appointment on time. This afternoon, the receptionist waves him up the stairs and Will climbs the steps in a good mood. He wears a pale yellow shirt and brown Levis that hang off his hips a little despite the leather belt.

He greets Clayton as he enters the sunlit room. The fragrance of perfume fills his nose. Will deduces his last patient must have just left through the back stairs. Not being a connoisseur of women's perfumes, the name of the scent escapes him, but Will does find this fragrance familiar although he cannot place on exactly who it was he remembers wearing it.

Clayton has already informed his staff they could leave for the day. He prefers to leave Will's sessions open ended and uninterrupted. His staff can also be nosey, and Will invites a lot of speculation.

"How are you feeling today, Will."

"I feel ok, Dr. Clayton." Will says, stretching his arms over his head.

"There's a fridge over there," Clayton gestures across the room indicating a small faux wood mini-fridge recessed in the wall. "We can start whenever you are ready."

He selects an iced tea and walks over to the wall of bookcases as Clayton settles on the couches. The remains of Clayton's iced cappuccino and his notepad sit on the coffee table. Clayton crosses his legs and observes Will allowing him to take his time and look around. Clayton takes it as a good sign that Will is curious rather than sit with downcast eyes completely closed off.

Will sips at the can of iced tea as he admires the collection of Greek plates in the bookcase he stands before. The plates are fine hand painted replicas in the red figure style, illustrating scenes from the Fall of Troy. His eyes are drawn to the death of Patroclus. He winces as he touches his shirt, fleeting shades of the wounded Patroclus bending to the triumphant Hector's spear.

Will half turns to Clayton. "Ready when you are."

"Carpe Diem." Clayton says. "I took your advice. Made a list…"

It is Will's turn to laugh. "I imagine I am pretty frustrating for you…"

"Talking to you about how your mind works makes me feel many things, but frustration is not one of them." Clayton assures him.

Clayton wants to transition the conversation so he can tell Will about his own brand of empathy, but he can't seem to create the right segue. He had not wanted to bring it up at the restaurant, but the longer he waits, the more difficult it will be to tell him. Clayton has been in this situation before and it never goes well.

"So, are we good?" Clayton asks.

"We're good." Will says, and he means it. "We can continue if you like." He continues to gaze at the plates, recalling each of the scenes as the figures come alive in his mind while Clayton resumes his questions.

"I would like that. I was asking if you could get the killers out of your head when your profile is done. And you said that you only think like them, you don't become them."

"Right." Will responds feeling guilty as all hell. It would appear that Clayton intends to pluck at this particular note until he hears a true pitch.

"Then, you must have lots of forts." Clayton grabs his notebook and begins to write. "Have you ever had any difficulty shutting them down in your mind once the case is over? How much is left behind to influence who you are at any moment, Will?"

Will's mind goes into hyper-drive at Clayton's prompt. His question strikes again at the heart of why Will is here. Will's mind erupts and Clayton is replaced by Garett Jacob Hobbs' corpse slumped in the corner staring at Will as his daughter, Abigail, chokes on her own blood beneath Will's fingers. The corpse tells Will to let Clayton see. Will knows what Clayton will see.

Who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today, Will.

Will realizes his eyes are closed. He opens them to find himself staring at his hands in his lap. He looks to Clayton, who acknowledges Will's attention with a slight lift of his chin.

"Back from your little trip, now?" Clayton says.

"I thought I drifted off…I do that sometimes."

"Good, seems like you are getting better at detecting that about yourself. I *will* tell you when you do it, you know. It would be pretty shitty of me not to."

Will laughs. He's not sure if he's amused or relieved. Probably both.

"Thanks. To answer your question, I honestly don't know how much I'm *influenced*, but I am definitely affected by it. "

If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them, left the inspirations as they are, you would have become someone other than yourself.

"I admit it can be upsetting at times, some crime scenes more than others. I have nightmares… But, once I uh…*profile* them, I continue to refine my understanding during the course of the investigation as more evidence is uncovered. I don't get the big picture all at once."

Adapt…evolve…become…

"After you catch them, the killers; you can turn them off in your mind? Forget, compartmentalize?"

Jack had wanted to believe the same thing and Will had not corrected his misperception. But, Will needs to be truthful to Clayton.

"Not completely. Their profiles fade, or at least retreat from my consciousness, sometimes manifesting when something I see triggers a memory. But my dreams are very vivid and often…unpleasant." Will sucks in a breath and decides to bring Clayton on board with Hobbs. He has to start somewhere. He continues to walk around, the couches still too confining and close.

"There was one exception. Garret Jacob Hobbs."

"The Minnesota Shrike." Clayton is familiar with this one and the subsequent unpleasantness.

"Yeah. You know about that case?"

"I read up on what I could find. I know what he did. I know why you had to shoot him. I know about the daughter's disappearance and your trial."

Will nods to himself, rolls his eyes, swallows hard and lifts his eyes to Clayton's. "Anything else you think you know?" Will asks, suddenly wary.

Images of Abigail on Hannibal's kitchen floor flood his consciousness. He remembers clutching at her, unable to differentiate between the quaking of his own body or the spasms in hers as blood spilled and bubbled from both in shared agony. He clenches his fists until he can push the sounds and visions away, back…back…

"No…but I take it there is something else." Clayton raises his head, looks at Will expectantly, "I'll let you decide when you want to elaborate on that." Clayton begins to write again in his notebook. The Hobbs case has clearly struck a nerve, a very tender one.

"Do you need to stop?" Clayton asks Will, not wanting to push him too hard.

"No…I find some things more difficult to talk about than others."

"As long as you're sure. Go ahead; you were saying Hobbs was an exception."

Will sighs. The descent down the slippery slope is becoming harder to avoid. He resumes their original train of thought with difficulty. "Even after I shot and killed him, I kept seeing him, but I was sick, with encephalitis so I hallucinated a lot of that among other things. I was pretty messed up at the time, highly suggestible."

Draw me a clock, Will…what time is it?

Will is tempted to massage his temples but resists knowing that will signal his fatigue to Clayton. He imagines Clayton has already surmised quite a lot and is seeking confirmation from Will. Will squints as the sunlight filled room seems to quake with the pulse of a strobe light and he feels warm hands and moistened lips across his face.

He blinks the sensations away and forces his eyes to widen in response to Clayton's voice.

Clayton senses Will has checked out again, if only for a minute. At least his questions are probing enough to cause impressions or memories to stir deep in his subconscious and rise to the surface. If he aware of them, he will invariably analyze them, either now or later.

"I read about the illness, at least that it was, would have been part of your defense strategy had the case not been dismissed. Hobbs was the first person you killed, wasn't he?"

"He was." Will finds Clayton's phrasing of the question odd. He emphasized the word *first* as though indicating the first in a series, not the first person *ever*. Will wonders again what Clayton might be keeping to himself.

"I imagine that experience had an effect on you." Clayton says.

“That kind of experience would affect anyone.”

“Yes, but not everyone thinks like you. I asked you before how much of the killer is left behind to influence who you are, but once you killed someone, your own feelings come into play. That had to have changed things for you. So, before Hobbs you imagined what a killer felt, after Hobbs, you found yourself contending with your imagination and your own feelings about killing.”

“Your point?” Clayton’s trenchant questions rankle. The prick of spines breaking through skin along his back is so real that his shirt has become damp.

“Can you tell the difference between your emotions and the killer’s?” Clayton asks and Will’s mind freezes. He feels the caress of sharp talon across his cheek, scraping to rest beneath his chin. He tries not to look at the bone colored antlers growing up from the couch like a briar patch.

Is it harder imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing now that you’ve done it yourself?

“Will?” Clayton says, “Is there a difference between your emotions and the killer’s?”

“Of course there is. I was deeply affected by shooting Hobbs, but it was justified.”

Clayton would like to ask Will his definition of his chosen rationale, not the legal one. He can see that Will is being evasive, but Clayton also discerns Will wants to talk through it. It is as though he is speaking to two Will Grahams.

“But Hobbs is not the only person you have killed, is he?”

“How much do you know Dr. Clayton? I know what is in that file…”

“I extrapolated and deduced. Give me some credit, Will. I may not know the answers to the questions I throw at you, but often, your responses answer them for me. And, hopefully, for you.

“And raise new ones.”

“That’s the idea... Let’s leave the question of influence for later. You are not ready to discuss this yet.”

“Fine with me.” Will says.

Clayton glances at his watch. Will is tired. He has been retreating into himself off and on during their session together and Clayton does not want him to burn out. At least Will is aware of going into his mind.

“How about if we call it a day. I believe you have enough rolling around in your head. Roll it around on your own for a while. I do not have a four o’clock tomorrow if you would like to meet again.”

Will looks at his own watch. It is nearly five fifteen. They have been chatting for over an hour and Will has no sense of the passage of that time. He feels like time was suspended somehow.

“Yeah. I can do four again.” He walks to his couch and gathers up his book bag. “I’ll just see myself out?”

"The staff has already gone, so I'll lock up behind you. Take care, Will."

Will slings his bag over his shoulder and before long he is standing outside waiting for his taxi in the hot Tuscan sun.

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Will tosses and turns in his bed that evening. He could not bring himself to focus on his computer files. The images and memories of the afternoon's session intrude into his consciousness constantly. He tries to recall his conversation with Clayton, allowing his imagination to slip around phrases, hopeful that the evocative sensations connect and grow into something more recognizable and less fractured.

He awakens hours later in a cold sweat. He can't shake the image of blood stained snow or the fangs and antlers that tear across his skin, each vying for the tender space between his ribs where his heart hammers and his lungs swell in fright, unable to exhale.

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"Do you still see Hobbs?" Clayton asks at their session the next afternoon.

Clayton watches Will resume his pacing around his office, this time halting in front of a photographic print of a beach. It is Clayton's most favorite print in the room. He took the photo himself. He watches Will scrutinizing the print as he speaks.

"No…" Will corrects himself. "Yes, I still see him in my mind sometimes and he says things, but his function now is more symbolic. It's my subconscious talking to me if that makes sense." He turns around to face Clayton once again. His expression is subdued and absent is the storm of a moment ago.

Clayton is amazed at Will's ability to analyze himself, and to recognize that he is essentially just having a conversation with himself, like everyone does, but because of his empathy, his subconscious mind spills into his conscious mind.

"It makes perfect sense." Clayton says. "Most of us simply can't do that or don't recognize it. It's kind of like trying to analyze a dream, but a waking dream for you, huh?"

"That's as good an analogy as any." Will is relieved Clayton can grasp what he is talking about. He is so receptive and quick at making connections, filling in the blanks.

"What does Hobbs symbolize for you, Will?"

Will thinks about his answer before he offers it. "I killed him because he was a serial killer who had his daughter as a hostage, a knife at her throat. It was justified not only in my mind, but by the FBI's thinking as well.

"His death led me to the Ripper. I suppose when Hobbs brings a message from my subconscious, he is acting as a warning, he appears to me as a cautionary figure. I have to figure out what he is trying to tell me."

"You mean; you have to figure out what you are trying to tell yourself. Something is nagging at you in your subconscious that your conscious mind needs to know."

"Yes." Will nods in agreement. "That's how it is. When I recall conversations or when a previous conversation, event, or whatever pops in my head, I see the people, interact with them, but I know it's not real. It's just how I think."

"Wow. You never have a minute when you aren't being bombarded with images." Clayton feels the discomfort Will is experiencing at discussing himself, but Clayton also senses relief from him. Clayton knows what it is like to have no one understand you. You believe you are alone.

"How do you feel right now? Is talking about this stressful?"

"Well, it's not a walk in the park, but talking *to you* is not all that stressful and I want to talk to you about that."

"I'm listening." Clayton says, his face serene. Will has definitely noticed something and has been kicking it around his head for a while it seems. Clayton is learning Will never disappoints.

"You have a pretty good grasp of how my mind works, why is that?"

"You already know my area of interest is in empathy and its applications…" Clayton begins to explain.

Will's thoughts are piling on top of each other and he walks around the room, his hands gesturing as quickly as the words flow. "I am not bombarded with images from you at all. In fact, you barely register. You're not… readable like other people."

"You can't profile me." Clayton says.

"No, I can't. It's like you have forts of your own." Will keeps his distance from Clayton's couch. Will senses that mist hovering nearby. It has been there the entire time, lingering just beyond his reach.

Clayton nods. Will has saved him the trouble of introducing the topic he has wanted to discuss. "Very perceptive of you. It's less a fort and more of a shield I suppose. I am afflicted with a kind of empathy, too."

"What do you mean a *kind* of empathy?" Will blurts out. "And when were you going to tell me about it?"

Will isn't sure what he feels at the moment. Anger is at the top of a short list. He feels his jaw tighten and does not care if he cracks a tooth. He glares at Clayton on his couch, pen suspended in the air. He is so angry he has to turn his head so Clayton is at least spared the pained grimace he knows he is wearing. Besides being angry, he feels stung.

Will cannot believe the someone else who shares this condition or whatever it is, is his fucking psychiatrist. He wonders if he is a magnet for malpractice.

He looks to Clayton, who is now perched on the edge of his seat and Will feels that mist edging ever more close as though it was actually in the room. At that moment Will sees that Clayton's presence is not absent at all, neither is it entirely unreadable. Clayton is the mist. At least that is how Will's mind interprets his emotional presence. Clayton is able to shield others from his own emotions so that he can…sense and read their emotions? And why wouldn't he tell his new empathic patient that…

Will closes his eyes as he thinks what he would have done. He would have used his gift to gage his patient's emotional state. He would likely sense a lot about his patient. He would maybe even expect his empathic patient would have figured it out by now. He might even hope his patient trusted him enough to let his guard down. He would definitely be smart not to let his own defenses down around this particular patient. One who invites raging psychopaths to take up space in his head.

The mist continues to ebb and flow, as Clayton sits motionless, staring at his notebook. "Are you empathizing with me, right now?" Will asks.

"I'm trying. That is I can't seem to get a lot. You are leaves in the wind whereas other people are very…solid, heavy, dripping with emotion. You are really, really closed off. What do *you* feel?"

"Well," Will starts and then stops. This is an incredibly strange conversation. It feels very *intimate* all of sudden and Will's impulse is to shy away from it. *Fuck it.* Will thinks.

"I think in images and imagery. My mind visualizes you, your presence, your profile as it were, as a mist. A benign mist. I usually feel other people's emotional baggage hit me as soon as I look at them whether I want it to or not. It is really difficult to tune it out, but I manage most of the time. With you, there is no baggage. It's kind of nice, actually."

Clayton's face is the most serious Will has seen so far. "Will, I deeply apologize. I should have said something sooner. I just didn't know how to bring it up. I've never had a situation with a patient where I had to."

"I can see where your ability gives you an advantage with your chosen profession." Will tried to keep the sarcasm out, but failed.

Clayton ignores Will's tone, accepts he deserves it. "An advantage, yes. But, I can only sense emotions. I can't do what you do. I don't know why people feel as they do, or how they got into the mental place they are in. But it's a start so I know what questions to ask. So I know when to continue and when to back off…" Clayton pauses and looks to Will, "I can only guess with you."

"Because of my forts. You can't get past them?" Will walks back to his couch, settles in.

"I recognized them for what they were. I did not try to get past them or knock them down. Truthfully, I don't know if I can. I do know that would be a breach of your space, your privacy, a forced entry."

"Oh." Will says simply. "So, you are kind of a mirror then? You are able to mirror the emotions of others and you shut down your own so they don't get in the way?"

"That's close. I can't shut them down, but I can shield them so they don't interfere. I respond to another's emotions by feeling what he feels, much like a mirror reflecting images. You on the other hand, actually assume the perspective of the other without filters. You are aware of everyone at once and you can think like them. I can't. You avoid because you can't pick and choose. You get it all. So do I, but I have learned to adapt."

Will understands why he is so comfortable around Clayton. Both of them cursed with heightened forms of empathy and both with their own defenses, developed over years of interaction and each with their own need to protect the mind that so often works against them. Will wonders if Clayton sees it that way.

"People's emotions are difficult to shake off, aren't they?" Clayton says.

"Like dog hair on my clothes." Will agrees.

Clayton nods, "Sometimes, after leaving here and going home, I find myself standing in the shower, wishing I could rinse them off."

"What do you think would happen if we let down our defenses?" Will asks.

"I'll show you mine, if you show me yours." Clayton grins. He passes his fingers over his lips as he gazes at Will. Will is smiling at him, but Will has leaned back in his seat. His hands rest stiffly on his knees.

Will feels a faint flush up his neck. He thinks he does not want to know what would happen. In fact, he is quite certain he does not.

Clayton senses Will's reticence and says, "I think that we should keep the current emotional arrangement as it is and get comfortable with that. We are still establishing our boundaries, right?"

"Good idea." Will manages to say. A part of him would like to know Clayton better, to see him the way his empathy will reveal, but Will likes this comfort zone; needs it. It is such a relief to just *be* with Clayton and he is not prepared to change their dynamic just yet.

There is also the matter of Will's own baggage. He cannot simply unpack his trunk of horrors and allow Clayton to poke around without context or guidance. Clayton would be recovering from the shock for weeks… right after he had called the authorities to come take Will away in a straight-jacket.

Will understands what this shared empathy with Clayton means. Clayton knows when Will is holding back and when he is being evasive. He has known all along. There is a comfort in that. Their current arrangement includes agreed upon boundaries and rules. All Will has to do is articulate his desire to avoid and Clayton will acquiesce. This is a conditioning of sorts, but the end game is honesty and Will cannot fault Clayton for that. The method is transparent and like Clayton himself, its application is subtle, gentle.

It is inconceivable to Will that something could possibly be going right for him for a change.

Clayton is rising from the couch. Will looks up at him, watches him stretch his arms and crack his neck. "Want a drink? I could use one."

"What have you got?" Will asks.

“Bourbon. Jim Beam.”

“Perfect.” Will says. And it is. For the moment, anyway.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Bedelia visits Fiesole and nearly spills her wine. Will and Clayton test boundaries and Will gets a phone call from Detective D'Angelo.

The awesome sense of power Will had felt did not eclipse the fear that accompanied the act of killing. Each act of killing brought him closer to becoming. He feared the becoming because he wasn't supposed to become, he was supposed to pretend to become.

Chapter 6

Bedelia visits Fiesole and nearly spills her wine. Will and Clayton test boundaries and Will gets a phone call from Detective D'Angelo.

Du Maurier sits outside the café with two women companions under a canopy of mint green at a small round table looking down upon the agreeable town of Fiesole. To the north she can see the archaeological zone, the ruins of the Teatro Romano and the Museo Bandini in clear sight, and to the south, the expanse of Florence in the distance; all she has to do is turn her head.

Fiesole is older even than Florence, the remnants of Etruscan civilization, long gone, evident throughout the environs. The town is a maze of terraced landscapes, crumbling walls, and winding streets that recall the days when horse drawn carts rolled along the cobbled avenues rather than cars. Even now, the pedestrian traffic far exceeds the motorized.

It takes Du Maurier over an hour to reach Fiesole from her own residence outside Siena. Du Maurier travels to Fiesole for the sole purpose of monitoring her patient, one of the women sitting at her table now. Of course, her patient does not call her Dr. Du Maurier. She has another name now, another identity as credible and finely constructed as the last. As Dr. Francesca Durant, she can continue to apply her craft and reap the financial rewards that go along with it.

Nearly all of Du Maurier's acquaintances, she would not consider them friends, are daughters of bankers, wives of bankers, or CEOs themselves. They are patrons of the arts and political puppeteers. As far as they are aware, Dr. Durant has resided in the UK for several years having recently returned Italy to resume her practice much to Lydia and her family's relief. Whatever would they do without her?

Her other companion, a friend of Lydia's and by extension, Du Maurier's *friend,* is the daughter of one of the local wine dynasties. Both Lydia and Nina reside in nearby estates. Nina has provided support for her friend by drinking up most of the afternoon's refreshments so that poor substance abusing Lydia will not indulge her bad habit too much. Du Maurier had neither admonished Nina, nor discouraged Lydia. She is along for the ride that the 3k a month retainer provides her.

Du Maurier has had enough of the cheese, rustic bread, and fresh fruit. She has had more than her share of the fruity aperitif they have been sharing this late afternoon. Still, she takes another polite sip of the cloyingly sweet wine and decides that Lydia is very much like this sickening beverage; easy to swallow at first but nauseating after a time. After today, Du Maurier decides she will require at least 5k to remain on call. If Lydia's father balks; Du Maurier has ample other patients in similar arrangements.

Lydia tosses her head back, laughing as Nina raises her hand in the air seeking their waiter to order yet another bottle. Du Maurier rolls her eyes, but quickly recovers and excuses herself explaining that she needs to walk and get some air before the next round.

"Are you sure, Dr. Durant?" Lydia asks with a frown. "It must be a hundred degrees out there."

"Well, then I likely won't be very long. Please, don't wait for me. Enjoy the wine chilled as soon as he brings it." Du Maurier picks up her sun hat and makes her way through the scattered tables filled with tourists and out onto the paved terraces that lead away from the café and Museo. She inhales the hot humid air and relishes every moment away from the oppressively cologne drenched atmosphere of the café.

She orders a glass of something more to her taste at the lower bar and continues her slow walk of the grounds. The dry metallic undertones of the sauvignon blanc roll over her tongue effectively cleansing her palate of the sugar water she has been choking on for the past hour and a half.

To her west, the sun is sinking in the hazy sky although darkness will not fall for several more hours. The darkness does nothing to relieve the stifling humidity, but the temperature does drop significantly. She finds a space of chipped stone wall and carefully sits down to avoid causing a pull in the fabric of her dress.

She watches the people enjoying the swath of green grass and manicured gardens. People mingle alone or in groups, some lay sprawled on blankets, others tossing Frisbees, and still others watch an impromptu game of football among some local boys, a noteworthy achievement given the heat. The boys seem unaware of the climate as they run, kick, and shove one another to claim the red and white ball they chase all over the expanse.

Her attentions wander to the young man walking his two dogs not far from where she sits perched on her wall, sipping at her wine. The dogs are not remarkable, but he is. As he approaches, Du Maurier can see the shirt clinging to his body is damp with perspiration that glistens over tanned and sculpted arms and legs. He cuts to the right advancing even closer to her position along the wall. His dogs are pulling him and he is cheerfully tagging along, content to let them wander where their noses take them.

Something in his face gives her pause as she tilts her glass to her lips. A second later she has nearly dropped her twenty dollar glass of wine, the liquid spilling from her mouth as she feels it dribble down her chin. She wipes impatiently, irritated at her lapse of decorum. Her mind cannot grasp what her eyes are most definitely seeing. Her fingers clench at the glass tightly so she does not let it shatter on the asphalt that sways unsteadily beneath her.

No…it can't be, she muses as she wipes her face with the back of her hand and then adjusts her hat so that her face is obscured. The silken stubble, the elegant jaw line, the full perfectly arched brows, and the luxurious mass of brown curls are all there; even the mouth is the same.

Du Maurier remembers the mouth. She had gazed at Will Graham behind the bars of the Baltimore State Hospital; her mouth almost touching his as she had breathed the words she knew would infuse Graham with renewed purpose. Distractingly moist lips had parted then twisted in disbelief as he had looked at her awestruck and achingly beautifully alone in his cell. She had looked into his darkly haunted blue eyes as she had retreated backward into the arms of the guards who had mussed up her suit and escorted her out.

Months later, she had gazed at him again from across the FBI interrogation table unable to tear her gaze from his placid blue eyes and that sensuous delicious mouth. He had thanked her for her words. Little had he known for what he was truly thanking her; even as she told him she had not said enough; she had in fact said too much.

This beautiful creature tugging at his dogs is not Will Graham. There is too much unadulterated contentment in his countenance and too much swagger in his walk. He is frighteningly similar, however, from the tousled locks on his head to the pout on his lips as he frowns at the larger dog who is defecating barely inches from the walkway. She watches him praise his dog for doing what it was going to do anyway and then produce a plastic bag from the pocket of his cut-offs. He removes the pile from the ground in one swoop. He deftly turns the bag inside out and ties it off.

He's American. His accent is difficult to identify. Eastern seaboard, Du Maurier thinks. Not New Jersey, but not as far south as Virginia. Somewhere urban and close to…Philadelphia. Du Maurier listens more closely.

He lets them off their leash and watches his dogs chase each other for a few minutes. His attention is focused on the dogs; he doesn't seem to notice Du Maurier at all. Finally, he re-attaches leashes to collars and is soon beckoning the dogs to follow him.

"Where's the trash, girls? Where is it?" he says to the dogs. They look around, hesitate, and then pull him away in the direction of the nearest public waste receptacle. Du Maurier watches him for several minutes, watching Will Graham's twin as it were, as opportunity begins to register in the recesses of her mind.

She must learn everything about him. This will take some time but not terribly much. Du Maurier glances back toward the café where Lydia and Nina await her return. She will not seek to alter her current arrangement until she has ensured that multiple visits per week are warranted. Poor Lydia is about to have a relapse. An ugly and upsetting melt down is imminent and its implications painfully tragic for one so young, so pretty, and so unfortunate as to rely on Du Maurier for a bright future.

This adorable doppelganger may yet provide Hannibal a much needed respite from the boredom plaguing him. Boredom and Hannibal are an undesirable combination. The danger is that instead of soothing the wound dealt by Graham, the very likeness of this beguiling young man to Graham might open it up again. The flames of unspoken desires would again rage within Hannibal.

Unless Du Maurier can serve him up not as a surrogate; Hannibal would never be satisfied no matter how pretty he is, but as a bag of breath and bone unworthy of his resemblance to Hannibal's tortured treasure.

Her pretty gift will ingratiate her into Hannibal's good graces and place Hannibal firmly in Du Maurier's debt. Du Maurier will indulge her own feminine whims with him first, given that Hannibal, once he sees him, will invariably be quite smitten and possessive. She sighs as she begins her ascent back to the patio. Hannibal can be exasperating in his attentions. Like a toddler, he cannot resist playing with his food.

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While walking his dogs along the crest of the hill overlooking the ancient amphitheater below, Clayton finds himself recalling his last meeting with Graham. He has not stopped berating himself for his lack of judgment. He can't really fault Will for something neither of them expected. It is now clear to Clayton that alcohol not only impairs judgment, it weakens emotional barriers between grown men with empathy disorders, barriers better left in place.

Clayton thinks they did not so much establish boundaries as cross them. He wishes he could remember precisely how, though.

They will be meeting at his office tomorrow for Graham's regular session and Clayton has decided to put his liquor cabinet under lock and key. And give said key to his office manager, Maria making her promise on the life her first born not to give it back to him no matter how much he begs, threatens, or cries.

Five hours after their first tumbler of Beam, Clayton had reached for the bottle of Southern Comfort and snatched it before Will could pour himself another shot. The small bottle of Beam, a token gift, had already disappeared along with half a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. Will's propensity for drink was abundantly clear. Clayton allowed that the discovery of their shared empathy warranted letting off some steam, but that had been no reason to become piss drunk.

Except that Clayton had been unable to stop himself and had matched Graham drink for drink until he realized through his stupor that he had somehow amplified Graham's emotional attachment to this particular activity. He had confused Graham's emotions with his own or his own emotions had mirrored Graham's. Either way, his brain had been quickly and effectively pickled.

"Will, I've got to lock up and get home. You can call a cab, I have to drive." Clayton had said with thick tongue that felt like sandpaper against his teeth to the half-lidded and yawning Will on the couch. Will had sat up straight, rolled his shoulders and pushed his hair out of eyes for the hundredth time. A gesture Clayton knew he would never tire of.

"Oh, Shit. You do have to get up early, don't you?" he had said, a sheepish smile on his lips.

If only Clayton had been cognizant of that hours ago. Mouth cotton dry and head throbbing behind his ears; he had weaved his way to his desk to retrieve his tie and jacket from the chair. His limbs had felt heavy and unwieldy so Will had helped him put on the jacket, and had somehow managed to fix his tie for him when Clayton's own fingers had refused to cooperate.

He had learned too late that Will had practically been weaned on whiskey, on drams of stuff harder than was in his cabinet. Clayton's preference for flaming Sambuca aside, he couldn't light a match to Graham. Nor would he have dared to last night.

"Yes, I do have to be here bright and early. I will be envying you your bed tomorrow morning." Clayton had said without mirth.

“Yeah, I’m sorry.” Will had breathed, his head bent, eyes lowered in response to Clayton’s unwavering gaze. “Didn’t mean to go through your entire stash.” Will had said, his Louisiana drawl more pronounced.

Will had not been slurring his words though. He had moved slowly, with a practiced gait, but was surprisingly lucid and at least in command of his gross motor control. Clayton had been neither, and quite sure he was destined to stumble down his own steps on the way out and break his neck.

“Oh, we put a dent in it, but there’s plenty left. You ok?” Clayton had asked him, not wanting to lay the blame solely on Will, his patient. He had been embarrassed that Will knew how tanked he was. At the time, he had been so tanked he had actually *believed* his shield was still up and functioning. He has since reconsidered that assumption.

“Should have asked yourself that several shots ago.” Will had laughed as he had tucked in his shirt, and smoothed his unruly and slightly damp curls.

Clayton had not returned the laugh. He had been searching through his desk for Excedrin. He had taken a mouthful before calling a cab for Will. He had leaned on Will coming down the stairs and Will had braced him without comment.

Will had offered to share the cab, “You are totally wasted.” Will had said smirking at him as the cab sat, engine running out front of his office. “You should not drive, and you should definitely not drive that car.” He had pointed to Clayton’s shiny burgundy Mercedes E 550 Coupe.

Clayton had stubbornly refused. He now had to drop off the Mercedes for a new bumper after taking out part of a low stone wall fifty feet from his house. Clayton had not remembered the drive after pulling away from the curb at his office. Even now he is forced to admit he cannot remember the entire evening. His memory is disjointed, fragments of laughter and commiseration, cigarettes and whiskey.

Clayton reprimands himself on how stupid he was to have even gotten out the stuff in the first place. Will’s file had indicated he self-medicated from time to time, a symptom of depression. Clayton should be the one having his head examined.

Bella has stopped next to the sidewalk, her backside perched over the grass. Clayton pulls out the plastic waste bag and coos to Bella what a good girl she is. He is relieved that she dropped her load in the grass and not on the walkway.

Clayton sighs, stretches his arms over his head causing the leashes to become taut. Bella and Cara strain against him and he finally gives, taking off their leashes and allowing them to roll in the grass. He watches them, smiling and knowing that their lolling tongues and soft whines are meant for him. They run around him in circles chasing one another.

The evening had turned out well though. He and Graham had bonded over those shots, more so than they would have in weeks of therapy sessions. The uninhibited conversation had allowed both of them to address the awkwardness of their shared empathy and settle into something comfortable.

At least that was the impression Clayton had awakened with this morning along with a mammoth headache. He had also retched over his toilet for half an hour before he could drag himself to his damaged car to drive into the office…late. He had not been able to eat a solid thing all day. Alka-Seltzer and breath mints had been his diet all afternoon.

Maria had not said anything, but her deep brown eyes had alternated between sympathy and rebuke. He had felt her eyes on his back every time he turned around. His office suite had been cleared of all evidence of the previous evening's revelry before he arrived, but the smell of stale liquor and cigarettes lingered much like the sour aftertaste in Clayton's throat. Clayton had offered no explanation and she had not asked.

At five o'clock, Maria had poked her head in his door and said, "Enough penance for today, why don't you lock up and go home yourself." It had taken all of a nanosecond for him to agree with her.

One of the last things Will had said before climbing into the back of the cab was to remind Clayton to make him explain about the Ripper.

"And don't let me off the hook because I will try and get out of it and I will try to antagonize you, but you shouldn't let me…put off telling you." Will had slammed the car door. Clayton had last seen him rubbing his temples in the back seat of the cab as it had pulled away.

Clayton had wanted to call and make sure he made it home, and stayed there. But, he had barely managed to stagger into his own house and into bed let alone remember to phone Will.

Surprisingly, Will had phoned him this morning, inquiring how his evening had gone after they had parted company. "You made it home? You are one lucky bastard. You were pretty trashed, Daniel."

"When did you start calling me Daniel?" Clayton had asked, his forehead flush against the cool lip of his porcelain kitchen sink. Clayton had not expected his headache could get any worse, but it could, and did.

"Right after you told me that you liked how I said your name." Will had said.

Clayton had been able to mumble something like, "Oh, ok then."

"Guess I'll see you Thursday at four, for our regular session."

"Looking forward to it. Thanks for calling." Clayton had said. He had clicked off his phone and then had felt like slamming his head repeatedly into the sink.

Clayton decides he will never, ever have a drink with Will Graham again. Ever.

He stops to let Cara take her dump. He figures he will head back down the hill now that the sun has begun to sink below the horizon. Clayton's stomach rumbles and it is a good feeling after last night. He takes the girls to a trash can to dispose of the doggy bag and guides them homeward. He'll make dinner for the three of them.

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Will sips at his iced tea while staring at his computer screen. He has read and answered his few e-mails. The one from Jack had been difficult for Will to get through as they usually were these days. Jack's wording always appeared friendly the first read, but typically betrayed his remorse edged with thinly disguised reproach. The reproach was leveled at himself, not Will. Will could not decide if the reproach had more to do with his foolhardiness or his utter failure to take

Lecter down. The remorse was less about Will's wounds and more about his own. And underneath all of that, like a slick acidic undercoat, there was the bile of betrayal. And this was leveled at Will.

Jack had always been incredibly difficult to be around, even though Will knew he had tried to tone down his intensity when he was with Will. Jack could be compassionate when he wanted to be, but he was more often than not insensitive to how Will transitioned from one mental state to another. At crime scenes, Jack had been delicate with him because he had relied upon his gift, at least at first. He had said he wanted to borrow Will's imagination. Will wants it back.

He had apologized for his lack of faith in Will after his incarceration. He had been sincere. But Jack had never been above using Will to further his own agenda and if apologizing helped in that regard, even better.

Jack's conduct of "that night" of the dinner, as they referred to it, remained under Jack's jurisdiction. Jack's version of events had held more sway. Will had said nothing; he neither concurred nor contested. Will had let the evidence speak. Regardless, the bulk of the blame had been laid at Will's feet.

When Jack was wound up, he was a locomotive, booming through Will's mind with clanging bells and whistles. There had been instances when Will had averted Jack's anxiety inducing gaze for days at a time. Jack could and did on many occasions reduce Will to feeling like the bullied teenager he had once been: other times, the sensitive son confused by his father's embarrassment.

Jack had become a beverage Will did not want to drink anymore, a tart mixture of bitter tea and bad medicine. Will had found another beverage much more to his liking.

Will takes another gulp of his iced tea, flavored with plenty of whiskey, lemon, and just a touch of sugar. He reminisces about the other night with Dr. Clayton, with Daniel as he now thinks of him.

Daniel is a fountain of cool refreshing water. Will had not realized how parched he was or how thirsty he could be. Will cannot remember the last time he felt secure enough to invite the emotions of a living breathing person to envelope and inhabit his psyche like he had allowed Daniel's to do.

Daniel's empathy combined with Will's own allows for a rather electric and stimulating transfer of sensations, desires, and yes, urges otherwise impossible to achieve. Daniel's shield as he had referred to it had succumbed to the liquor fairly quickly and Will had had the entire evening to assimilate and allow his imagination to create a Daniel in his mind that continues to blossom and grow as Will's mind continues to recall and reorganize the various impressions relentlessly rearranging themselves in the firing synapses of his brain.

The traffic is no longer one way, either; it's a two lane highway. Daniel is capable, or would be if not intoxicated beyond reason, of seeing Will as well. Will finds the possibilities frightening yet compelling at the same time.

Will cannot lie to him.

There is relief that he does not have to. Will lies enough. Will has found someone else who understands him. Unlike Hannibal, Daniel will not use that understanding to manipulate, persuade, or coerce. Daniel nudges, invites, and reaches. Daniel does not take from Will unless Will offers.

Psychopaths develop a talent for mimicking human behavior and Hannibal is the most talented psychopath Will has ever encountered. Hannibal had taken advantage of Will's state of mind, exacerbated his illness, all while earnings Will's trust and friendship, and he had done it masterfully. In retrospect, the perfection with which Hannibal controlled his emotions should have set off warning bells, but Will had been too sick initially and much as he hates to admit it now, too self-absorbed to notice, and later…it hadn't mattered.

It hadn't mattered because Will had discovered other arousing urges primal and pure writhing inside him that Hannibal's careful manipulations released. It hadn't mattered because Hannibal had shown Will how deliciously satisfying power could be once those urges found expression. It hadn't mattered because Will had never felt alive as when he was with Hannibal. It hadn't mattered because Will had loved him for it, for all of it. He loved him still. How fucked up was that?

Daniel operates in an entirely different universe. And Will likes this universe. Daniel is warm and sweet like honey on a fresh baked biscuit. Will tasted that biscuit only last night and could swallow it whole if he let himself.

How is Will to reconcile the two universes he inhabits? If Will allows Daniel inside his head, he will see Hannibal's hand in all that Will has become and Daniel will see Will for who he truly is. But, Daniel cannot help him if Daniel cannot see him.

It was Hannibal who had taught Will how to see into the recesses of his psyche where he had dared not look. Hannibal had forced Will to kill but Hannibal had not forced Will to enjoy it. After pummeling Randall Tier with his bare hands Will had stood over the still and ruined body trembling not with fear or guilt over what he had done, but in breathless shameless exhilaration.

Will's imagination had placed Hannibal on the floor beneath him; it had not been Tier lying there on splintered glass in what remained of his living room. And when it was over, and Will had collapsed, his anger spent, his desire to kill Hannibal had been stayed.

For Hannibal, Tier had been a means to an end. Hannibal had had every confidence Will would prove the stronger predator. Tier had been yet another gateway to awareness, another step closer to becoming.

The awesome sense of power Will had felt did not eclipse the fear that accompanied the act of killing. Each act of killing brought him closer to becoming. He feared the becoming because he wasn't supposed to become, he was supposed to pretend to become.

He had used his anger at Hannibal, his hatred of him to soothe the guilt of his actions, to cloud the intoxicating and awful power he had begun to crave, but Hannibal had been aware of this, had known all along and encouraged Will to cultivate his violence, hold onto it, and release it. Hannibal had been pleased that Will used his desire to kill him as inspiration. Hannibal had known Will could only use his hatred to mask his true enjoyment for so long. And for this, Will had hated Hannibal even more.

Even Steven aside, Hannibal had been *proud* of Will for trying to kill him by proxy, and he had known that killing Tier would purge Will of the hate so that Will could see clearly where Hannibal had been guiding him.

Will sees it now. Hannibal had been building trust between them. The special kind of trust only intelligent psychopaths can appreciate when one is the mentor and the other his beloved pupil. Hannibal had given a test to his ardent pupil, and Will had passed with flying colors.

Later, Hannibal had looked into his eyes from across his dining room table where Will had laid out his kill, presented in all its broken glory, and he had known Will had enjoyed it. Approval and delight had flashed across his crease of a smile and glittered beneath pale lashes. Later, Hannibal had again looked into his eyes as he had cleansed Will's wounds in tender tribute and he had known Will had enjoyed those attentions, too.

Don't go inside, Will. You'll want to retreat. Stay with me.

Where would I go?

Where would he have gone? He had to stay and finish the job for Jack. All the requisite accoutrements and tools were at Hannibal's house. He could not have prepared Tier alone, and Hannibal had somehow known that as well.

His morgue or butcher shop, or both, had already been prepared; everything in its place, including towels, aprons, and piped in music. Somehow, the Brandenburg Concertos had provided the perfect ambiance for the task at hand.

As Will had worked, Hannibal had kept him in the present through word and touch, patiently helping him to absorb and process the multitude of sensations and emotions so he would not become overwhelmed. Hannibal had guided Will's preparation of Tier's body, its dismemberment, and its reconstruction, never leaving his side. The two of them had shared more honesty and intimacy than Will had ever experienced in his life.

These are the ugly truths of the monster taking shape within, sharp rusted claws scraping against his mind and slicing at his stomach, dulled by whiskey chased with guilt. When Daniel becomes intimate with the monster coiled inside will he turn away in horror? Is there enough light to absorb the dark? If Daniel cannot withstand that terrible knowing; alone and festering, the monster is going to eat Will alive from the inside out.

Perception is a tool pointed at both ends, Will.

Last evening provided Will with some idea of how much intimacy Daniel can stomach. Their first venture onto their highway has shown Will that Daniel possesses the fortitude, if not the willingness to explore the possibilities. Will smiles, remembering.

There had been a cross pollination of sorts; and this is the only way Will can account for their strange exchange of feeling, thought, and sensation.

They had seemed to feed off of each other's emotions, the alcohol loosening inhibitions so that they interacted without considering the consequences of such abandon. Will had known after three shots that some of those boundaries they had talked about would soon be nonexistent between them, but he had let go despite his reservations. It was like he opened a door for Daniel to pass through; and that is exactly what Daniel did.

Then, the empathizing had really begun. Despite Daniel's suggestion that they leave the emotional arrangement at the status quo, barriers had begun to disintegrate one by one.

Daniel had empathized with Will's attraction to spirits much to his discomfort and regret later Will was sure. He had sounded like a pale ghost of himself on the phone this morning. And Will had empathized with Daniel's apparent attraction to him. Will closes his eyes, heat snaking up his neck as he thinks of the soft brush of lips and hot flushed skin against his own. He cannot get shit faced with Daniel again.

The only thing in Will's and in retrospect, Daniel's favor as well, is that Daniel does not seem to remember much about it. Will is grateful for this. He does not want Daniel to freak and refer him out, though after last night, sending Will away is probably the last thing on Daniel's mind. Will owes it to him to tell him, if for nothing else to discover deeper implications, implications that stir restlessly beneath Will's consciousness and his trousers.

Still, Daniel is ethical above all else. Will is grateful for this, too. Will is confident that despite the lapse in judgment, Daniel would never hurt him. Each of them is guilty of indulging their demons and their curiosity and none of it would have happened except for the damned alcohol. Will smiles in spite of himself. It is gratifying to know that his psychiatrist is not infallible and in some ways is just as fucked up, lonely and *human* as Will is. Perhaps not *as* fucked up. Will is pretty certain he has Daniel beat on the fucked up part.

Will had, however, managed to keep his other remaining walls intact. The walls around the forts of his nightmares would require more than alcohol to flood them open. Those walls were better left to sober and selective targeting for demolition.

His land line phone rings and Will sees that it is a call from the Firenze Police Department. He knows he will have to deal with whatever it is eventually so he answers.

"Hello." He says noncommittally.

"Mr. Graham? This is Detective D'Angelo." The thickly accented and syrupy voice says.

Will does not bother to stifle the exasperated sigh. "How did you find me? This residence is a bit off the beaten path."

"Not easily. Please don't hang up."

"Give me a good reason not to and we'll see where that takes us." Will says.

"I read a little more about you and…I owe you an apology."

Will has heard this before. Wasn't he just thinking about Jack? "I won't ask what you read, but apology accepted."

Now she will ask him to do something he doesn't want to do. He waits for her to ask…*one, two, three…*

"I wanted to get your ideas about our killer the other night."

"You must be running out of leads to ask me."

"It's not like that…" D'Angelo says. "I am simply open to alternatives. Thinking outside the box."

"Still running forensics, I assume?"

"Yes. Mr. Graham, what did you see at the crime scene?"

"What did I see that you didn't?" Will pauses; then asks, "And I should play in the sandbox with you because…"

"Because I will not ask you why you are really here in Florence."

"That would be because you have already figured it out. Got anything else?"

"To save lives. The killer is still out there."

"Strike two. This is not a serial killer, but you already know that, too."

Will hears her breathing at the other end. He can practically feel her thinking. He wonders why she wasn't more prepared before she dialed his number. He realizes that she is young and new and eager to impress her superiors. She believes he can help deliver this killer for her.

"You may need a favor someday, Mr. Graham. And judging by your habits, that day may come sooner rather than later. I will have your back as you say, as much as I can. How about that?"

Will knows she really has nothing else to offer, but a cop in your pocket is better than none at all. "What is it about the crime scene that has you stumped?" Will rubs his eyes and hopes this won't take too long.

"Tell me what you think happened and I will tell you what we think."

Will smiles. She wants to make sure he's genuine before she asks her real questions. Not bad for a rookie.

"The victim was a criminal, or at least engaged in criminal behavior. He preyed on younger, weaker individuals, probably boys, probably for sex. The killer was likely a former victim and followed our dead guy to the grotto where he was found. Our killer's attack on our dead guy allowed the new victim to escape. He eviscerated our dead guy for his past sins and exposed his sinful soul to god. He also paved a way for forgiveness in his own twisted way."

There is silence at the other end. "Hello?" Will says.

"Our thinking was that the killer had an accomplice. Bait. Shit. That's why we can't work up a possible motive."

"No, it was a rescue. You have no leads on the *bait*, either?"

"None. It's like he disappeared. No witnesses. If what you say is true, he is probably traumatized." She says.

"And not talking to anyone. So there's no way to make a connection between the rescued and the killer or the victim. What do you know about the victim?"

"We've identified the victim as a former priest. He was an American who moved to Italy. He served many years in the clergy, most of his life. You seem to be correct about the rest."

"Did he quit the priesthood before or after he moved to Italy?"

"Before. He was active in the church here, but not as a priest. He worked in an art shop, framing and matting pictures. We ran the customer receipts but nothing popped…" D'Angelo continues to inform Will about the victim's work habits, bank accounts, and so on. Will half-listens as his mind turns.

Florence was full of many such shops. Art and prints of fine art were in great demand as were beautiful frames. Picture frames easily cost more than prints; depending on the materials the frame could cost many times the price of the reproduction. But Will did not believe any of that had anything to do with the killer. There was something about the wafer.

Images filled Will's mind as the bits of evidence lodged in his subconscious began to rearrange themselves into information he can process with his conscious mind.

"The wafer in the victim's mouth wasn't a wafer, it was a cookie." Will says.

"What?"

"A cookie. I know this sounds strange, but the deceased had a partially digested cookie in his mouth. It was meant to be a wafer, but the killer did not want to use a genuine wafer, the cookie is significant."

"Ok, we are running that but what difference does that make?"

"It's a unique cookie. It's called a Nilla Wafer, made by Nabisco."

"And…"

"And it's not the sort of item sold in local stores is it? Maybe he brought it with him from the states. But those wafers are significant because…"

"Because if it didn't matter, he would have placed any type of cookie in his mouth, whatever was available, but he didn't. And he purposely avoided a genuine wafer."

"If you can find where he got the cookies, you might find him. I would think that he is also American, here on a passport or VISA, and knew this former priest as a child. And the priest knew him, too. Maybe they both liked Nilla Wafers."

"Or that was the signature treat of a pedophile." D'Angelo says.

"Not bad, detective." Will says.

"You used to do police work, didn't you?'

"A long time ago." Will decides that the conversation has run its course. "Was there anything else, I have an appointment…"

"No, nothing else. Thank you, Mr. Graham. I owe you."

"There is one favor I would ask right now."

"What's that?'

"Would you keep this conversation between us as well as my presence at your crime scene?"

“I can do that. Well, good bye Mr. Graham and…good hunting.” D’Angelo hangs up before Will can say anything. He decides he is just grateful that D’Angelo seems like the type of cop who will keep her word.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Hannibal reflects on his evening with Bedelia.

Hannibal rips the soiled bedding from the mattress nearly tearing the fabric. Du Maurier feels like a consolation prize. Will should be here. Abigail should be here. Even after a year, Hannibal cannot reconcile the loss. He accepts the aching, takes strength from the aching. And yet, what he would not give to have it stricken from his chest altogether.

Chapter 7

Hannibal reflects on his evening with Bedelia.

Hannibal plucks a long blonde hair from his pillow, dangles it from his fingers so it catches the sunlight, watches it float on air until it lands on the hand woven rug inspired by the Majolica vases he collects. He compulsively inspects the rest of his bed as he stretches and rolls onto his side. The scent of Du Maurier's perfume has infiltrated every fiber of the satin sheets. Hannibal finds the fragrance pleasant enough; the significance not so much.

More pleasant is the memory of Du Maurier's hair fanned out over the deep merlot of the sheets, strands of gold splayed against blood. Du Maurier had seemed afloat on a sea of blood, the white of her skin stark against the satin pool beneath her. The theatricality was breathtaking as she probably intended.

More than once, his hands had pressed firmly around her throat in a vice tight against her trachea. Du Maurier had smiled between half-lidded eyes, her hand firmly clenched around his cock each time. He had enjoyed satisfying her, tenderizing the moist mound between her legs and hearing her scream with pleasure that had sent shudders through them both. She had acquiesced to his desires and yet submitting to her own was beyond her grasp. She retained her position of control, unable to relinquish it and yield it up to Hannibal.

Hannibal supposed that was to be expected. Trust was not something they shared. She would always hold herself separate, not part of him. And because she has never allowed him to be a part of her, she can never trust that his affection for her would stay the desire to end her. They are as two vipers guarding their nests. He admires this and this is why she still breathes.

Du Maurier had labeled him dangerous. She had fled. Hannibal had not appreciated the maneuver until later after he had learned she had sat in the interrogation room of the FBI, playing her role of victim with focused finesse. She had actually told Jack Crawford that if he believed he was about to catch Hannibal it was only because Hannibal wanted him to think that. How she must have wallowed in her own deviousness. It never crossed Uncle Jack's mind that Du Maurier had allowed the FBI to find her. She had brilliantly played Crawford, extracting immunity before admitting to virtually nothing. Smoke passing through Jack's fingers.

But, it was her conversations with Will over that same table that had occupied considerable space in Hannibal's mind. Whatever had been said between them, and Du Maurier was frustratingly vague, it had convinced her to purchase only two airline tickets in supreme confidence.

Discussion of Jack flowed as freely as wine; discussion of Will unfolded in layers as thin as an onion's. If Hannibal was obsessed with Will; then Du Maurier was obsessed with Hannibal's obsession. A viper will leave its nest if it believes the threat warrants the risk and so she had inserted herself into Will's awareness cloaked as an ally. First, at the Baltimore State Hospital, a fact he learned from Will, not Du Maurier. She has yet to mention it. She did discuss her visit to FBI headquarters. Hannibal has misgivings about both encounters.

Hannibal yawns and stretches, kicks the sheets aside and walks to stand in front of the open window that overlooks the courtyard below. He allows the sun to bathe his body in warmth. Each according to its nature Hannibal thinks. In bed, Du Maurier does not deny her nature, she becomes.

As sunlight had warmed the window sills and moved across the carpet, Du Maurier had slipped out of his bed, her lips caressing Hannibal's in a silent adieu. Hannibal had made no move to interrupt her as she dressed and walked out his bedroom door, checking her watch as usual.

He would see her soon enough. He always did. They lived only an hour's drive from each other, as they had done in Baltimore. In Baltimore, Du Maurier and Hannibal had kept tabs on one another, struck a balance as it were, a truce of sorts freezing all the pieces on the board. Until Will Graham.

Will had upset the chess board. Du Maurier would say Hannibal had allowed his obsession to get the better of him, that it was Hannibal who disrupted the board. Hannibal smiles. The board had become dull anyway. With barely a breath, Will had swept away the dust from its cracks and crevices, and rearranged the pieces. Hannibal will never play chess the same way again.

As for Will, Will has disappointed him; wounded him even, but Hannibal would have expected nothing less of talent such as Will Graham. Now, the wound is all Hannibal has of him and he holds it tightly, like a keepsake.

A life without regret would be no life at all. That being the case; Will should have a very full life. Hannibal often finds himself wondering what Will is doing wherever he is. Hannibal is aware the FBI was not kind to Will and they essentially washed their hands of him. Imagine that.

He does imagine Will trying to rehabilitate his mind near another fish filled stream with miles of forest and dirt road all around having abandoned his former residence. Perhaps he even found a place near the ocean as he often talked about. Wherever he is, Hannibal is sure he is tormented with whiskey soaked dreams and acrid blood stained memories. Perhaps when he thinks of Will; Will is thinking of him, too.

Hannibal's thoughts return to Du Maurier. He never thinks of her by her first name. He wonders why that is and then loses interest. What does she want? And why does she want it now? Hannibal sighs. It is a terrible thing not to be able to trust your psychiatrist.

As his psychiatrist, Du Maurier had been insightful and Hannibal had valued her insight. Even now, it is a role she does not relinquish easily despite her claims to the contrary. She does provide him ample opportunity to keep his mind sharp.

As his colleague, Hannibal's lips twist into a wry smile at the preferred euphemism, she had protected their mutual interests with a compass pointing to self-preservation. Hannibal can overlook this. Her professional practicality had facilitated his escape. Leaving the U.S. would have been much more difficult without her.

However, her *professional* visit to the Baltimore State Hospital to see Will Graham was an act of ruthlessness worthy of Hannibal himself. She had crossed a line and he had yet to confront her about this highly personal interference. She would claim she acted in her own best interest, she might even claim she was curious, but Hannibal knows her reasons are far more complicated. Hannibal is not certain he could conjure the requisite aloofness required for such a confrontation and is content to ruminate upon the topic a while longer.

As his lover, she has her talents; talents she has clearly refined of late. Her performance last evening almost persuades…

If Du Maurier is the sumptuous main course, Alana Bloom had been the ultimate dessert. She had been a guilty pleasure he had welcomed into his bed. She had been to Hannibal as fragrant as a blossom after the rain and as delicious as new wine. A raven-haired beauty, endowed with long gorgeous locks that fell to her breasts along with pliant mouth and legs, Hannibal had reveled in the taste of her as she had given herself over to him. She had been an entirely different animal than Du Maurier.

Ultimately, she had been a means to an end, a necessary pawn sacrificed for the psychological advantage she had afforded Hannibal over Will. Alana had graced his dinner table with her company many times and she would have provided a most succulent entrée had there been more time. He had been quite fond of Dr. Bloom, a most favorite lamb.

However, neither of them could provide the banquet Hannibal had anticipated with Will. Will was an excuse for gluttony and Hannibal could have gorged himself upon plate after plate. Hannibal had systematically encouraged the co-dependency Will accused him of fostering even as Will was falling into a prescribed pattern of behavior as familiar and comforting to him as his flannel shirts. His awareness had made no difference, in fact, his awareness worked against him since Hannibal had only to misdirect Will's attentions elsewhere.

Yes, Will would have been an eager participant in his own deflowering if not for Jack. Will would have been content to explore and experience his becoming under the guise of working for the FBI a little longer if not for Jack. After a time, Hannibal would have dispensed with Jack and Will would have thanked him for it. Or Will would have taken care of Jack himself. Hannibal muses a moment on how that scenario might have played out…

If only there had been more time, and less Jack, Will would have been his. Will had been so close after Randall and Mason, ripe and ready for the plucking. Hannibal had understood Will's need to flee from the urges that terrified him. Hannibal had understood because he remembered his own terror. He had endured the anguish that came with sloughing off his cocoon to allow his true self to emerge. Once embraced, the terror receded. Will had been almost ready to surrender to that embrace.

Hannibal's emergence had been abetted by a few but was largely his own accomplishment. He had endured alone. He would have helped Will; been the mentor and companion Hannibal had never had. But Jack had pushed, and Will had panicked. Hannibal should have remembered that terror that night in the kitchen, but he had not. Consequences…

His hatred had been festering for hours, hot like a boil on his skin. Still fresh and adrenaline flushed from his altercation with Jack and Alana, he had stood behind Will as he had faced Abigail. Will had turned slowly around to face him. Drenched from the rain with pistol hanging from limp hand to brush defeated against slim hip, eyes tightly shut as he had tried to wrap his mind around what his eyes had just seen. His words had tumbled out in a single sob that tore from his chest.

You were supposed to leave…

But Hannibal had not. He had wanted to punish Will. To cut him as deeply as Will had cut him. Show him what he had forsaken for the FBI. For Jack.

We couldn't leave without you…

Hannibal had waited while the implications of his words penetrated Will's wet skull. Without hesitation, Will had closed the space between them, had pressed his cheek in answer to Hannibal's outstretched hand. Had he even noticed the knife clenched in Hannibal's other hand? Hannibal had stroked Will's face and stared into those captivating blue eyes one last time. Hannibal remembers the anger, the hate roiling inside him. And the boil had burst. Hate prompted action, and act he had.

The first act; a quick sure cut had caused Will to shudder in shock, the second; a twisting of razor sharp linoleum in soft white flesh had sent Will into his arms, an embrace of heat, blood, and agony. Hannibal had stroked wet curls and had endured the grinding of tear stained cheeks as Will had shaken his head against his shoulder while Hannibal had spoken of teacups and time.

Hannibal had let him slip to the floor to slump against the cabinets, already smeared with Jack's blood. And he had felt a few seconds of euphoric satisfaction gazing down at Will, shirt wet and dark, mouth twisted in pain but eyes, so clear, seeing him, truly seeing Hannibal.

I let you know me, see me. I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it.

The hate had spewed like venom from the viper's mouth. And then Will had uttered the words that dropped like stones into the pit of his stomach.

"Didn't I?"

Will had struggled to speak, body quaking in spasms, his face pale as the blood flowed as from a fountain, his heart still beating strong in his chest and Hannibal could hear it; hears it still. Hannibal recoils from the memory but it remains causing his chest to seize up, his lips to twist. Will had spit those words from his mouth with such bitterness that Hannibal could not doubt the words were true.

Will had betrayed him. But the betrayal had been a symptom of inexperience, of fear. Will's imagination, his gift, had been unable to grapple with all the images, feelings, and possibilities. Unable to reconcile what he wanted with what he knew he was supposed to want; unable to reconcile what he needed with what those around him needed, what Jack needed. He had needed more time.

In his desire to injure the one who had injured him, Hannibal had acted without thinking it through; he had not acted in pure hate. The hate had been impure, spurred by the injury of Will's betrayal. The festering poison had guided Hannibal's hands. He had caressed Will's face gently, brought him close and then with the same hands that had loved him; had rendered the irreversible punishment.

Only Will could cause Hannibal to lose his mind like that. Only Will could cause Hannibal to feel blood stained fingers ripping through his rib cage, splitting and cracking bone to reach his heart. And having reached it, Hannibal feels Will squeezing until a chunk of beating muscle slips into Will's hand and he rips it away. Hannibal wishes Will would take the rest. Better to have no heart at all than this…

Hannibal rips the soiled bedding from the mattress nearly tearing the fabric. Du Maurier feels like a consolation prize. Will should be here. Abigail should be here. Even after a year, Hannibal cannot reconcile the loss. He accepts the aching, takes strength from the aching. And yet, what he would not give to have it stricken from his chest altogether.

Did you believe you could change me the way I changed you?

I already did…

I forgive you, Will. Can you forgive me?

Compelled to finish what he had started, Hannibal had beckoned to his adopted daughter, his beloved Abigail, and had watched Will's eyes fill with the terrible knowledge of what he was about to do. Stuttered pleas dropped from wet lips onto deaf ears as Hannibal had plunged the same slippery linoleum blade into Abigail's scarred throat, laying open wound and memory. He had watched her blood spray warm and thick across Will's face to mingle with his own.

Poor Abigail had been a victim of failed paternal love. Loved and ruined by her fathers; one father who had tried to kill her, another who did, and the one who could not save her. The tea cup shattered again.

Hannibal has never destroyed something he loved before. He reminds himself the destruction is part of the becoming but he knows he mourns this loss of innocence in particular. Events have already transformed Will. The teacher who had sat in Jack Crawford's office, indignant and annoyed at Hannibal for psychoanalyzing him is gone. Hannibal does not know the Will Graham who emerged from his blood soaked kitchen. Hannibal had been forced to leave Will to his own devices at a crucial moment in his transformation.

Hannibal snaps the fresh russet colored satin sheet in the air, watches a shimmer of the luxuriant fabric catch the sun, a faint reminder of curly brown locks, until it settles on the bed. He methodically makes the bed, first one corner at the top then, the opposite corner at the bottom, then the other bottom corner, then top for the perfect fit.

Hannibal's screaming mind is quieted in the repetitive movements of the task. Control. He can no longer control Will. He smiles and corrects himself; as if he ever could. Hannibal could never predict Will. That was the attraction.

He unfurls the top sheet, allows it to settle and methodically tucks it around the mattress, fold, tuck, fold, tuck, until the sheet sits pristine. He deftly slips pillows into the soft golden shams, evoking the rich burnished yellow of a Masaccio halo. Submission is the truest measure of power; and love is expressed in the relinquishing of that power. Du Maurier will never submit. It is not her nature. A viper will devour another viper. But a mongoose can be trained to temper its bite.

Whatever you are doing with Will Graham; stop.

Hannibal pulls the thin summer blanket across the bed, and then the maroon and gold dappled bedspread, tucking the pillows uniformly before smoothing the spread once more. Du Maurier believes she has earned the right to gloat, to remind Hannibal in countless ways of his pupil's failure. His betrayal. His ability to manipulate Hannibal like no one had ever done.

Will's manipulation of Hannibal and by extension, his betrayal is evidence of his pupil's mastery and a testament to Hannibal's skilful instruction. Will's only failure had been his inability to manage his fear and confusion, and Hannibal must take his share of the responsibility for that.

Du Maurier might very well understand this. In that case, she is intent on casting Will as inept, lacking, and thereby calling into question Hannibal's selection of him and levelling criticism at his methods. Is it her intent to sow the seeds of self-doubt to place Hannibal in her debt and to elevate herself in Hannibal's eyes?

That she, of all people, bore witness to how totally Hannibal had succumbed should be truly galling. That she had to save Hannibal from himself should be even more galling. He should be fortunate to have Du Maurier looking out for his interests.

Hannibal turns this over in his mind. Her visit to Will while he was under Chilton's care at the hospital had perhaps had multiple goals. To change the time table, encouraging Will to alter the pacing was only one. Will's resolve had taken quite a blow at that point. No one believed in him, not his accusations, and not in his innocence. Interfering with Hannibal's strategy had been engineered to vex Hannibal and firmly establish herself as another victim of Hannibal's manipulations.

And, she had not only been studying Will, but through Will, she had been studying Hannibal as well.

You spend a lot time building walls, Hannibal. It's natural to want to see if someone is clever enough to climb over them.

Hannibal was not the only one building walls. She had visited Will to give him a leg up to scale Hannibal's walls all the while defending her own.

A conversation with Will fills Hannibal's mind. It had been shortly after Margot Verger had begun her sessions and Jack and Will had interviewed Randall Tier. Will had speculated on what would happen if Hannibal's patients compared notes. He had asked how many patients had Hannibal persuaded like Tier, like him?

And, Margot and Will had no doubt shared much more than a bed. Will had mentioned Du Maurier's visit to him this same session. If Hannibal were to extrapolate from Will's train of thought, Du Maurier must have introduced a similar association to him. Planted a seed in the fertile soil of Will's imagination and then disappeared, allowing the seed to germinate in Hannibal's garden.

Hannibal opens the blinds all the way to let the morning sun bathe his bedroom in color. As the room brightens, Hannibal watches the way the sunlight reveals the tiny particles of dust that float in the air, released from his careful ministrations until they settle once again, invisible to the naked eye. He wipes a finger across his bureau and stares at the filmy substance collected on his finger. Hannibal wonders why he had not seen it before.

Quite simply, Du Maurier has been dust on his fingers. Will had not merely blown the dust away from the board, in rearranging the pieces he had unwittingly made himself the prize. Du Maurier means to deny Hannibal his prize. She is dust alighting on the entire board, invisible until captured in the light.

The viper had prompted the mongoose to bite her mate quickening the tempo of a dance to which she had not been invited. The queen was a most formidable piece, but one's position on the board was just as important. The dust has settled in the light.

How appropriate then to encourage the queen to move closer having dispensed with a few pawns. To let her believe he has been saved. That he has seen the error of his ways. He has mourned his loss for a year. That is customary, is it not?

Hannibal looks at his reflection in the full length mirror that hangs on the door of the antique armoire of wood varnished black over the centuries. He tilts his head, first one way then the other and is pleased with the visage he now presents. The blanched and pallid complexion wrought from years of enduring long, frigid winters in Baltimore has vanished and been replaced by a sun-kissed tone, more pleasing and deceptively inviting. He notes he even has a little sunburn across his nose and cheeks. He especially likes the shadow of stubble he keeps trimmed just so. The tactile stimulation of whiskers always stirs the most pleasant of associations within Hannibal. After smoothing his knuckles across his jaw, he decides he can leave it a couple more days.

Hannibal actually looks better than he has in years. He has missed Europe, especially the vibrant scenery and culture around the Mediterranean. So many places to visit, to hunt, to fish…

Let Du Maurier believe what she likes so long as it serves to reveal her true agenda to Hannibal. If she does not believe him saved, she will continue to monitor, to interfere, and to deflect. Hannibal needs only to lift an errant finger in Will's direction and Du Maurier will come running to assess the opportunity cost of remaining or fleeing him altogether. Wasn't it Machiavelli who wisely advised the Medici to keep one's friends close, but keep one's enemies closer?

He walks into the bathroom, arranges the various sundries he will use in the shower, and turns on the water to run for a bit. He steps in and begins to soap up. He washes his body and shampoos his hair the same way, in the same order each time. He is generally quick and efficient in the shower, unless there is a good reason to languish. Hannibal misses a proper soak in a tub. It has been a long while since he took a good long soak. Of course, the next best thing is watching someone else take a good long soak…

Hannibal splashes his face once more and steps out to grab the over-sized towel from the vanity. He allows an indulgent smile as he glances down at himself. He really must stop thinking about Will in the shower.

Hannibal dries off and as he stands in front of his closet, towel slung around his hips, he recalls the forecast for rain today and selects an appropriate ensemble. He dresses slowly and his thoughts turn once again to his predicament with Du Maurier. He doubts she is any more generous in her assessment of their relationship. If she thought she could kill him she would but it would seem she has decided to quite literally crawl in bed with him instead.

Hannibal finds her protestations about Graham amusing to say the least. Having finally seen him in the flesh, Hannibal has no doubt she found herself smitten with him as well. It was perhaps inevitable that Du Maurier would be curious about Graham, would have to see for herself the madness and the man who held her colleague enrapt. He had been a most singular topic of conversation between them for months.

Will had clearly made an impression and Hannibal wishes he could have been a fly on the wall. The subtle curve of her lips when she says his name now is indictment enough. Hannibal can only imagine the swell in her breasts, the quickening of blood as her heart must have pumped faster, and the dilating of her pupils as her eyes had devoured him in his dingy gray hospital suit, fingers wrapped around the bars of his dank and desolate cell.

He ties his shoes and stands to admire himself in the mirror. He looks quite handsome in his chosen attire. He wears earth tones now, foregoing the plaid, he prefers solid colors for his suits and accents them with the finest silk blends of patterned tailored shirts. No more three piece suits either. Not in this heat. He looks like a professor. Well dressed, older, polite to the point of frustration one would think him British if not for the accent.

Hannibal studies the huge finely carved Rococo-styled bed while recalling another, less ornate but infinitely more desirable bed. Du Maurier is eager to demonstrate to Hannibal that it is she who belongs here. Perhaps she does belong, in this bed. But not in the bed that exists in his memory palace.

Hannibal shuts the armoire and moves to apply a light sheen of mousse to his hair and a splash of cologne. Du Maurier could learn a few things from Will Graham. Effective manipulation requires actual feelings to be present.

Of all Hannibal's caterpillars, it is Will who captivated Hannibal. First, with his mind until Hannibal could no longer separate the beauty of the mind from the beauty of the man. Gradually, almost painfully Will had reached deep into Hannibal's being and claimed a piece for himself. Will's betrayal confirmed that unquestionably. Hannibal has not felt whole since that night.

Hannibal sees he had been blinded by his pride in Will and by his affection for Will. Will's failure was ultimately, Hannibal's failure. Though, Will had proven himself an apt pupil and had been completely convincing. Hannibal had fallen so utterly under Will's spell that he had been genuinely astounded when he discovered Will's deception. The deception could not be ignored because it had been right under his nose. Once again, Hannibal's olfactory sensitivity had alerted him of impending danger. That the danger was Will had *hurt*.

Even so, Hannibal had offered him one last opportunity to correct his mistake. Hannibal could be forgiving. A novice he was, everything still so new, his beautiful mind alternately processing and retreating. Had he known Abigail had been upstairs the entire time, would that have made a difference? Hannibal thinks it would have. But Hannibal wanted Will to agree to come with *him*. Abigail had been the surprise, the reward.

We could disappear, now tonight. Feed your dogs. Leave a note for Alana and never see her or Jack again. Almost polite…

Then this would be our last supper.

Of this life…

But, Will had refused and the hurt became poison. And Abigail had remained in her bedroom. Of all the things Will had been able to intuit, feel, and see; he had not been able to see behind Hannibal's words. He had not been able to grasp the truth embedded in the metaphors. He could not see another life for himself and so could not see Hannibal's teacup come together, until it was too late.

Hannibal glances up to see his reflection in the mirror. His eyes are wet, stinging as moisture wells up and slowly spills. He can smell the salty tear before he tastes it, lets it linger on the edge of his lip. He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, willing his muscles to relax. How many teacups could he shatter?

To the truth then, and all its consequences.

Consequences… The consequences had been shattering for everyone. Hannibal had had many months now to replay the events over and over in his mind. Will had entered his home with gun drawn. Had he drawn the gun for Jack or Hannibal? The only person who could answer that is Will. Hannibal wipes his lips, a quick motion, done. He blinks and begins to adjust his tie in the mirror.

Will had been careless. Had he only showered and changed his clothes after meeting with Freddie Lounds that day, Hannibal would have been none the wiser. Fortunately for Hannibal, Lounds preferred patchouli scented body sprays, most pungent and quite unforgettable, and, Hannibal notes with a sardonic curl of his lips, overbearing much like Lounds herself.

Hannibal wonders still if that slip had been subconscious sabotage on Will's part. Will had likely not even known himself. Had Hannibal's conditioning been that skillful? He would like to think so. Will had been such a perfect vessel, so receptive to whispers, so exquisitely attuned to the caress of patient fingers upon his flesh.

It remains to be seen if Will's performance had indeed been for Hannibal or Jack or to further delude himself. Hannibal suspects that Will is realizing the whispers he hears within his chrysalis are not entirely Hannibal's.

Hannibal surveys his bedroom, arranged identically to the one in Baltimore. But, the light is different here; it lends a luster to the objects and furniture, a promise perhaps of brighter days. A mantle clock chimes softly downstairs and Hannibal reminds himself he still needs to finish preparing his lecture for the board at the Uffizi Gallery.

Victor Boucher, pun intended, has an interview tomorrow. A visiting art historian, Hannibal needs their letters of intent and a contract from the board if he is to remain in Florence. He has no doubt the board will find him an acceptable replacement for his unfortunate predecessor. She had to return to London, apparently to care for a sick relative. She could not ignore the obligations of family and was comfortable in her decision; that her heart was in the right place, or so her letter had stated.

Hannibal knows the contents of her letter having composed it. But the letter did have a ring of truth to it. Her heart was in the right place. Second shelf, front and center, in the climate controlled fridge in his pantry downstairs.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

"You don't remember kissing me?" Will asks.
"You let me?" Daniel doubts he would have gotten close enough to kiss Will if Will had not allowed it. According to his file, Will is more than capable of handling himself.
"You caught me off guard." Will says.
"I caught an FBI agent off guard."
"Almost FBI agent." Will corrects him.

Chapter 8

Will and Daniel pick up where they left off, but without the alcohol this time.

"I see Will Graham has an appointment today." Maria says looking up from her computer.

Daniel nods and snorts a reply as he passes in front of her desk on his way to the kitchenette. This is not a conversation he wants to have with her. He retrieves a bottle of water from the fridge and moves to exit the kitchenette in favor of the lobby where the receptionist and staff are located along with a mounted TV and more comfy couches and a coffee table, for the patients. The back stairs to the upper level and his office are right by the door.

He pauses to crack open the bottle before turning to ascend the stairs and feels Maria at his back. She has now effectively cornered him in the kitchenette. She will follow him upstairs so he decides to get it over with. The rest of the staff is otherwise busy with work, but they are very good at appearing busy when they want to.

"So…will we all be leaving early again? I need to call my daughter if that's the case…"

"No. Nobody's leaving early today…unless you would like to." Daniel smiles at her. She looks up at him, purses her lips.

"You'd like that wouldn't you, Dr. Clayton." She nudges him and he nudges back. "Why don't you just invite him home? Wouldn't that be easier?" She says this in a way that means Clayton shouldn't allow Graham anywhere near his home.

"He's my patient, Maria. Stop it." Daniel raises a brow and points a finger at her. "You are overstepping…again."

"Ha! I'm not the one plying patients with liquor after hours." She has the decency to whisper but Daniel's unease is not alleviated.

"That was a mistake and I plan on remedying the mistake this afternoon. And thank you again for tidying up everything before I arrived the next morning. I am not going to discuss this as much as you would like to." He looks over her head toward the stairs, signaling their conversation is over.

Maria touches his tie, pretends to straighten it. "Look, I have known you a long time. I know you don't date patients…"

"Maria…" Daniel gives her a warning look.

"But you like him, don't even deny it. I know that look on your face. And he's cute in that lost puppy kind of way, but he is intense…intensely troubled."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning he seems out of your usual area of expertise. He stared into space like he was catatonic. He had no referral, no medical insurance…"

"He presents a certain challenge but I wouldn't take him as a patient if I didn't believe I could help him." Daniels says.

"Help him, Aye! Help yourself. See that picture over there?" She points to the gilded frame encasing a print of Raphael's *Triumph of Galatea.*

"I assume you are pointing at Eros?" Clayton says unable to hide the smirk on his face. She knows him so well. Maria is the only member of his staff that could get away with confronting him like this.

"Eros carries two kinds of arrows, Maria." He reminds her.

"Yes, he does, but it is too late for you. He has already drawn his bow and I know which arrow hit its mark." She shakes her head at him, adjusts a pin in her hair. "You tell yourself you are just trying to help. You have a good heart, but he is not a puppy."

"No, but he is lost." Daniel says.

"Yes, I suppose he is. Oh, before I forget…" she pauses and shoves a stray lock of salt and pepper hair from her cheek. Daniel finds the way she uses granny pins to hold up her hair rather endearing. He thinks the pins probably did belong to her grandmother.

"Forget what? Maria." Daniel says, still contemplating the image of Eros and his arrow.

"He's not lost in the liquor cabinet. Give me the keys." She says, quite seriously.

"No need for that. I was joking when I said…"

"Oh, no. Too bad if you were. If I were your mother I'd ground you for at least a month. Now hand them over." Maria holds out her hand, palm up with every expectation that the keys will be placed there momentarily.

"Dr. Clayton. Think of your patient." She says as Daniel rolls his eyes at the ceiling. He quickly surmises this is more about her feeling better about the situation than it is an indictment of his lapse of judgment. Her concern is genuine. And there is that fondness she has for him at the forefront. He knows he reminds her of her own son currently stationed overseas somewhere in Japan.

Daniel reaches in his trouser pocket and pulls out his office keys. He slips off the appropriate key and drops it into her palm. “Happy?”

“That was too easy. You really are concerned about him, aren’t you?” She shoves the key in her pocket. “I’ll put this in a safe place. You’ll be thanking me later.”

“Already am.” Daniel says. He leans over to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

“Ah, what would you do without me?”

“Let me give it some thought and I’ll get back to you.” Daniel says as he begins to ascend the stairs. He still has two patients to see before Will arrives.

Will arrives on time, a little early actually. He feels the eyes of the entire office on him as he crosses the lobby to check in. He tells himself this is no different than walking past his students back at the FBI academy. He grits his teeth, keeps his eyes down, and murmurs a greeting to the receptionist. She wears no name tag. Just as well. Less information for Will to process.

“Buongiorno, Mr. Graham.” She says, smiling. “I have some paperwork for you to sign. It is standard forms for billing and so forth. Would you read through it please?”

Will smiles at her English, glances at the forms, and asks, “Can I take care of this on the way out?” There seem to be a lot forms.

A plump woman with salt and pepper hair wrapped in a curious bun in the process of falling from her head emerges from a doorway. She straightens her thin sweater across her ample breasts. She ambles over to the receptionist.

“Hello. I am Maria, the office manager. You are the last appointment today and I suspect no one will be here when you leave, Mr. Graham.” A pause for the unspoken, *just like last time.*

“Better that you read and sign the releases now.” She gestures to the forms in front of the young receptionist, her hands waiving an invitation for Will to take them.

Will does not like her tone and neither does he like the way either of them is staring at him at the moment. There seems to be some kind of expectation beyond picking up the forms by their expressions. Will thinks he sees amusement in the twist of their smiles. He bites at the inside of his lip. He really would prefer to go over this stuff with Daniel. Especially the billing. He would rather not leave any traceable paperwork in his wake.

“I’ll just take it with me then.” He says taking the pile from the receptionist before she has a chance to reply. He turns and begins to walk up the stairs, shoving the papers in his book bag as he does. No one stops him, so he continues, one step at a time, still feeling the heat of eyes at his back. He can’t get up the steps fast enough, but he forces himself to ascend unhurried, controlling his breathing as he approaches the landing.

He opens the door and walks into Daniel’s office.

“Hey” he says softly so as not to startle Daniel who seems focused on his lap top. Daniel looks up and flashes a quick smile.

Will notes the smile is lacking its usual warmth today. He doesn’t need empathy to figure out why. The irritation of a moment ago is forgotten, as are the forms in his book bag. Daniel is flustered and trying not to show it. He is wearing subdued colors today, mostly gray, and has yet to remove his jacket like he usually does.

Will had figured as much. Well, that makes two of them. Will is simply more comfortable being uncomfortable. Daniel, on the other hand, is used to feeling in control since he usually has the advantage. Unfortunately for Daniel, his empathy is no substitute for memory.

Will smiles in spite of himself. This should be an interesting conversation.

Daniel rises from his chair and walks over to the door to greet Will. Something is different about Daniel. Will’s thoughts begin to churn adding more pigment and texture to the canvas he has already painted of Daniel.

“Hello, Will.” Daniel says his voice tight. He had been fine until Will had walked into the room, a flurry of denim, cotton, soft curls, and *oh shit* thinks Daniel, those eyes again. Will is disarmingly accessible today, no longer leaves in the wind, more like a force of nature.

Will thinks Daniel says his name too stiffly. He doesn’t want Daniel to start acting all proper on account of getting drunk and frisky. They were both equally to blame, but as Will’s doctor, Daniel likely feels the responsibility more acutely. Will quickly decides to sink that boat and see what else floats.

“Hello, Daniel.” He says, wearing a lop-sided grin and brushing past Daniel in his haste to get to a couch.

Daniel thinks Will shouldn’t use his given name here, in the office, during a session. This is mostly because his name rolls off Will’s tongue like melted butter. He swallows, at once feels slippery warm tongue and the sear of liquor in his throat. Soft whiskers and softer curls beneath his fingers, the tang of sweat and after shave on pale skin and cotton collar. Was he feeling that, or Will?

“I think Dr. Clayton is more appropriate in this context, don’t you?” Daniels says, too quickly, absently holding the door aloft. Will stops in his tracks, half turns, and looks aside.

“Oh, well Daniel was ok before, but whatever makes *you* more comfortable…doctor.” Will hears the door slam behind him.

A soft sigh escapes Will. This is new territory for him. He’s not sure how to take it from here. He decides now would be the right time to give Daniel the present he brought. He reaches into his book bag, retrieves the bottle of Jim Beam.

“Here,” Will says, “To replace your stash.”

Daniel numbly takes the bottle from Will’s hands and feels an assortment of emotions from him flash within, among them, the warmth of affection. The soft flutter of lashes as Will looks at him confuses Daniel even more. Daniel’s fingers find his tie while his mind takes momentary refuge in the tactile stimulation.

Daniel calms himself. He let his shield down before Will arrived. His idea was to encourage trust. But, now he thinks his emotions are becoming mixed up with Will's unless…he can't tell the difference because Will is feeling the same as he is.

Will realizes why Daniel feels differently today. There is no shield; he has laid it down for Will. Daniel's presence is not gentle mist upon faint shadow and Will's thoughts about him are not scrambled and disjointed as they had been during previous meetings, before the whiskey. This is the Daniel from the other night, now sober and painfully aware of being so.

As Daniel touches Will's mind, the act of empathizing does not cause Will to instinctively retreat in search of impressions to analyze as it invariably does if his shield is up. Daniel's quiet mist has already slipped into his consciousness, a gentle spray of surf on a warm summer's day. Will can almost taste the salt and feel the sand at his feet.

When Daniel had moved from pleasantly buzzed to shit faced, Will's consciousness had been inundated with these same impressions. The utter sensuousness of the sea and sand coupled with smooth whiskey and smoother lips had washed over Will making him realize how brittle and sour he has become.

Will, we both know the unreality of taking a life, of people who die when we have no other choice. In these moments they are not flesh but light and air and color.

Isn't that what it is to be alive?

Daniel is very much light, and air, and color. But he is very definitely flesh, too.

It is unlikely that Daniel has this effect on anyone else, just Will. If anyone had been affected like Will had been, Daniel would surely have been informed by now. Will intends to, as soon as he can find the words.

"I saw your car out front. I'm really sorry." Will says, taking his seat. He watches Daniel sit in his usual couch, but Daniel's expression is anything but the usual.

"The car is…peripheral. What do you think happened? Between us, I mean?" Daniel is sure that Will does not miss the veiled question beneath the question. "Even without your empathy, you probably know everything about me." Oddly, Daniel feels relief.

Will laughs and adjusts his glasses, "People with empathy disorders should be careful who they get drunk with. We were asking for it as soon as you poured me a glass and I accepted. Things happened more quickly than we could process them; and *that* is all that happened, Daniel."

Daniel sits quietly, lips parted not sure if he should smile or not. Perhaps *that* was all Will wanted to have happened. He also doubts Will is ever going to address him as doctor now unless he absolutely has to. He supposes it doesn't matter at this point.

Will would like to see Daniel smile. "I don't know everything about you, but I know more than you intended. I gather this is a first for you."

"Try not to look so smug. I get the distinct feeling a little more happened than I remember. So, let me apologize for my behavior." Daniel says, "Now, would you fill me in on what it is I am apologizing for."

"You really don't remember?

"No, Will, I don't."

"You might eventually remember everything…what do you remember?"

"I remember being…very trashed. Again, I apologize. Very unprofessional but given the circumstances, not surprising. We talked and drank. I remember some of the conversation and I must have blacked out. How friendly did we get?"

"Very friendly. The kind of friendly that can't be mistaken for any other kind of friendly."

Will shakes his head as he says this, the little lines around his mouth and the creases at the corners of his eyes deepen with the smile that creeps along his lips as a flush of pink colors his cheeks.

As far as Daniel can tell, Will has a very clear memory of the other night. And, the memories appear to be good if Will's demeanor is any indicator. Will's emotions concur.

Encouraged, Daniel says, "And you kept your appointment, anyway. Look, Will…I think that we need to clear the air before we can continue. What do you think?"

"I think…I would like a drink." Will grins broadly, knowing full well the effect his non-answer and his smile will have on Daniel.

"Very funny. Not a chance." Daniel bites at the inside of his cheek and thinks what a little tease Will is. He is actually being coy.

"You don't remember flirting with me?" Will asks eyes cast down, fingers playing across the arm of the couch.

"Clearly not. But…that is entirely possible."

"You don't remember kissing me?" Will asks.

"You let me?" Daniel doubts he would have gotten close enough to kiss Will if Will had not allowed it. According to his file, Will is more than capable of handling himself.

"You caught me off guard." Will says.

"I caught an FBI agent off guard."

"Almost FBI agent." Will corrects him.

"Are you are upset I don't remember the kissing or that I don't remember kissing *you*?"

"Which are you more upset about?" Will counters.

"Did you kiss me back?" Daniel says evenly.

Silence. Will shifts in his seat. The rosy blush returns, spreads from his neck, likely to his ears if Daniel could see them through the curls.

Clayton leans forward, actually enjoying this way more than he should. “Oh, you did. And you didn’t stop, did you. Didn’t push me away or slug me?”

“You know, I could have your license revoked, Dr. Clayton.” Will sets his jaw, his composure intact as his eyes meet Daniel’s once again

“Uh-huh. Would you like me to kiss you again?” He leans forward slightly allowing his knee to brush across Will’s trouser leg. Daniel watches the blush grow darker still.

“Maybe later…” Will’s voice trails off. The whisper of contact from Daniel brings the other night fully into his consciousness. It is the most recent encounter of the physical kind that Will has had. Every sensation prickles all over his skin. He used to be better at this.

“Why did you kiss me, anyway?”

“I would think the obvious. What did I say?” Daniel leaves his leg where it is, grazing the fabric of Will’s jeans.

The two exchange a look. Will looks aside but the corners of his mouth twist up a little. He knows Daniel’s knee remains because Will wants it there.

“You didn’t say anything. And I didn’t ask. We just sort of fell on the couch here…” A helpless awkward frown forms on Will’s lips. “You don’t remember anything? Really? You’re fucking with me, right?”

“Sadly, no.” Daniel retorts. “How far did it go? On the couch I mean.”

“Not far. Nobody took their clothes off or anything.”

“Why did we stop?” Daniel says.

“I stopped. Because I realized how drunk you were. How drunk I was. It didn’t seem…right.”

”It wasn’t. I don’t know what I was thinking. Well, I can imagine… Shit. I sure as hell don’t need to add to your anxiety.”

“That’s the thing. I wasn’t anxious. To be honest, I was enjoying it until I started really thinking about it. I knew what I was doing, but I was sure you didn’t, wouldn’t have…if you were sober.”

“Saved from hating myself in the morning. Quite the southern gentleman, you are.” Daniel pauses, “I take it that tumble on the couch was a first for you?”

Will hesitates before answering. There is a slight furrowing of his brow as he looks aside, his mind clearly at work. Daniel waits to see if Will offers an honest answer.

Will does not want to discuss tumbling on couches or couches in any general sense of the word.

“Well, besides needing to renegotiate our boundaries,” Will says, fidgeting once again. His fingers trace along the fabric of the couch. “There are implications here other than questions of sexual orientation. Besides, I haven’t had any in so long, I am not surprised.” Will looks to the bookcases seeming very surprised he confessed so much in a couple sentences.

“Christ, Will. You didn’t have to tell me that.” Daniel says taking in the pale blue eyes and the tightly drawn mouth. Several inappropriate thoughts run through Daniel’s brain and he reprimands himself, but the attraction is not going to go away. More importantly, Will did not really answer his question but Daniel decides not to press the issue. They have time.

“Oh, I think you had some idea. Empathy aside, you are still a psychiatrist. You’d have asked me… eventually.” Will says.

He has never met a psychiatrist who did not bring sex into therapy at some point. Even Chilton had attempted to somehow associate sex, or Will’s lack of it, with his violent pathology and delusions of playing god. Poor Frederick. If only it was that simple.

“Probably. “ Daniel agrees. “But only in regard to your overall physical and mental health. Why? Are there some issues you want to talk about?”

“Now who’s funny? I guess you’re going to refer me to a sexual therapist?” Will says half laughing.

“Waste of time. You wouldn’t go.” Daniel rolls his head against the back of the couch. “What do you think was going on between us?”

“Well,” Will rubs at his jaw, “I think it works like this; you feel my emotions in real time whereas I understand yours through the projection I have created of you in my imagination. We can apparently influence each other’s emotions and emotions lead to actions. I guess I was in better shape than you to analyze it all.”

“So all this happened because of the drinking?”

“The liquor was a factor but you are the variable here.”

“I am?”

“Before the other night, you had your defenses whatever they are up…your shield.”

“Ok.

“Your shield came down with the whiskey. When it did, the effect on me was clear.”

“Effect? What effect?”

“You are a mirror, right? You can actually feel other people’s emotions as clearly as your own.”

“Yes.”

“You keep your emotions separate from what you sense, that is your shield. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, your empathy does project whether you realize it or not. It’s just that other people aren’t affected by it, except maybe you make them feel calm. Which, I guess is a good thing for your patients. If your shield is up, you empathize and no one notices. If your shield is down, the only one who notices is you.

"With me, shield up means I sense you as that mist we talked about. Shield down, like the other night, means that mist has substance, it is suffused with all kinds of impressions that bring all the things I see about you in my mind into full focus. A focus I don't get when your shield is up."

"So, I am an open book to you."

"My empathy is not a substitute for mind reading. You aren't an open book but I can read between the lines. You are empathizing right now. Your shield is down."

Daniel nods. "How does focus feel to you?"

"Where there had been only muted color, there is saturation. And like the other night, if I open up when you are opened up, the emotional transfer becomes all tangled up. It's why you did not register to me before. I didn't associate the mist with you. My subconscious was preoccupied with constructing an impression that kept changing, readjusting."

"How did you come up with this?" asks Daniel.

"I've had a couple days to think about it." Will says, "And believe me, I thought about it a lot."

"Yeah, well, I've had a couple days to beat myself up over it."

Will holds up a hand. "It's ok, really. Your ethics are not on trial here. I take as much blame as you. I feel a little awkward about it, but I don't want you to feel badly. I don't want it to affect our working relationship."

"Well, it will, you know. So this is what happens when we let our defenses down. I suspect you have profiled me by now, huh?"

Will appreciates Daniel's directness. "I have. Although I keep learning about you as we talk." Will rises from the couch, begins to circle the room.

"You want me to tell you?" Will asks.

"I told you what I felt about you at our first meeting. Seems only fair, I guess."

Again, the offer of reciprocity, of trust. Daniel remains unguarded; shield still cast aside for Will even though Will's forts remain securely closed to him. Will's estimation of Daniel continues to climb higher.

"I walked around your office the other night. I think I looked at every single object in the room. I watched your reactions as I touched things."

Will pauses in front of the bookcase that holds among books, the Greek plates, and plenty of other art pieces and framed diplomas. "You pushed yourself through school and had the grades and bona fides to meet all the right people. A little family clout, maybe?"

Daniel nods in agreement but permits Will to continue without interruption.

"You travel and don't mind decorating your office with mementos, but I suspect the good stuff is at your house. You display enough to appear successful, but not so much that you show off. You are not comfortable with your wealth, or are at least uncomfortable with how it makes people see you.

"The items you collect are meaningful to you, not random souvenirs to prove you've been there. You savored the experience of searching for these things. Life is valuable to you and you intend not to waste yours.

"Your concern for others, for other people's feelings is evident everywhere. The office is inviting, carefully constructed to put people at ease, appeal to mood with colors that evoke nature, especially the ocean. Your empathy can be overpowering for you, as it is for me. You are very private and about as social as I am."

Will looks to Daniel who is watching him intently from the couch. Will's thoughts turn to the print of the beach scape hanging close by. He hesitates, ambivalence hanging from threads in Will's mind like the gulls suspended in flight in Daniel's photo. The print is dated August, 1999. Daniel would have been about nineteen.

Daniel knows that Will has taken his office apart piece by piece, removing all but the most relevant pieces and has rearranged those like evidence in a crime scene. Will has already assumed Daniel's perspective, has already, in essence, been the ghost of Daniel's past. Will's conflicted pause says it all.

"You've had an awful lot of time to profile me, Will. That is not all you came away with, accurate though it is."

"You're right." Will edges closer to the lovingly matted and finely framed print.

"You took this photo." Will pauses again. The print is the piece that has pricked his imagination and sits in Will's brain like a splinter.

"This…this is the key to understanding you. Because you are tied to it. It is large enough to be seen from anywhere in the room and it faces your desk so that you can look up and see it anytime. And you look at it all the time."

Daniel flinches. He knew Will would see him stripped down to his core, but the knowing hasn't made it any easier. He has certainly set himself up, made a mess of things between the whiskey laced kisses he can almost taste as he stares at Will and the pounding in his chest that hammers away under Will's scrutiny.

"Well," Will says, "Something happened there that has defined your life ever since. You experienced a brush with death. It's why you value every minute. I feel this beach every time I look at you." Will pauses, licks his lips as he thinks. "You are ocean breeze, deafening surf and soft wet sand, salt and brine on my tongue. This place…it follows you."

Daniel sits quiet and still. Will understands that Daniel has been upset with himself the last couple days. If Daniel cannot handle exposing his own secrets and wounds, he will not be able to handle Will's. Will can only temper the experience so much.

"I think I understand, but you can keep this…to yourself, you know." Will says as he slips his hands into his pockets.

Daniel looks at the print and then back at Will. He would never discuss his personal life with a patient, but Will is no longer just a patient. Will is likely to be as much a defining part of his life as that strip of beach. Daniel senses sadness in Will, directed at him, pooling in Will's eyes as Will gazes at him without looking away.

Daniel swallows his trepidation. He cannot expect Will to shed his secrets if he isn't prepared to do the same. It doesn't matter that Daniel's secrets do not light a candle to Will's, what matters is that he is willing to talk openly about them.

"I will tell you the short version. No doubt you know too well how growing up with this…empathy is not easy. I didn't understand it and I had no idea how to explain it to other people. I would get in trouble at school and home for blurting out things, contradicting people, especially adults. I had my issues, always in therapy. High school was…a nightmare.

"Finally, I finished my first year at college. I came home for the summer. I had no real friends. My family loved me, love me still, but they find me difficult to deal with. I…make them uncomfortable being able to know and intuit so much about them all the time. It's like they have no privacy. At least that is what they have all told me in some way or another.

"Thanks, but no thanks." Will says.

"Exactly." Daniel takes a moment to breathe deeply, prepares himself to finish.

"So, I take a drive to the beach, to Cape Henlopen…" he nods at the photo hanging next to Will, "….by myself of course. I take a cooler, a blanket, beach chair and I sit all day soaking up the sun, reading… I have to stay and wait until the beach clears out. The life guards don't leave until five and people will hang around until the sun starts to sink behind the dunes."

Will is watching Daniel as he speaks, but Daniel's eyes are focused on the print, remembering as he looks into the waves rolling onto the sand, the gulls frozen in the cloudless sky. Will recognizes that faraway look on Daniel's face. He imagines he looks very much the same a lot of the time.

"I had a miserable freshman year. The thought of going back…well I figured I would swim out and not swim back. Then I got to thinking how my suicide would taint the beach for my family. How they would never be able to go there again without thinking of me and what I had done. I would poison something I really truly loved.

"At that point, I was alone on the beach. The sun was almost gone. It was perfect. I could have swam out until I couldn't swim any more, looked back and my last image would have been a sunset beyond the dunes and beach grass. But I knew I wasn't going to do it.

"So I packed up my stuff. Walked back to my car. Drove home. Never thought about killing myself again. I somehow managed to get through school, one day at a time."

"Your empathy saved you. You knew what suicide would do to the other people in your life and you could focus on that, listen to that instead of hearing only yourself." Will says.

"I had stopped seeing psychologists, therapists, and psychiatrists after high school, so I have never really discussed it with anyone, even after all this time. But I took that picture to remind me of what I almost did. That there should be something I can point to in my life every day that makes me feel like I made the right choice."

Will looks to the print again, he sees himself sitting on the beach, at the water's edge, setting sun at his back as light shimmers like diamonds across the waves, so peaceful, so inviting to feel the cool dark depths take him down.

"Will?"

Will glances back to Daniel, eyes clear and inviting as always. Will points a finger at him, and there is a hint of a smile as he speaks.

"*And as he, who with laboring breath has escaped from the deep to the shore, turns to the perilous waters and gazes*."

"Ah, a gentleman and a scholar." Daniel grins, "I like Dante, too."

"Yeah…a favorite quote from his Divine Comedy. I rarely get the opportunity to use my classical education. It seemed… appropriate."

"It certainly was. Then, I'll counter with this one. "*Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost*."

Will is quiet now. Daniel is gazing up at him from his seat on the couch. Will walks over to his couch and sits, reclining slowly until he feels the upholstery firm against his back.

"You want to hear about my dark forest now, I guess."

"As your psychiatrist, I think it's time."

"You have managed to become more than my psychiatrist." Will says.

"Good. You don't seem to like psychiatrists."

"My reasons should become abundantly clear. You have probably figured my straightforward pathway became lost with Hobbs and the Chesapeake Ripper."

"Your profiles of both killers have taken up permanent residence in your mind. But it's the Ripper who tore your mind apart. Your fort around him doesn't insulate you, does it?"

"No. What would you say is the primary question in your mind about my relationship with the Ripper?"

"That's easy. Why him? Who was he that he got so close and twisted you up?"

"I have an easy answer for you. He was my psychiatrist."

Will watches Daniel's jaw drop. He waits while Daniel recovers. He allows him to chew on the morsel Will has presented him. He trusts that Daniel will recognize he is but tasting only the appetizer and the meal Will is serving will become more difficult to swallow with every course.

"Jesus Fucking Christ, Will." Daniel doesn't even breathe and exhales after realizing he has been holding his breath. "How…how could you even bring yourself to come here?"

"Because only another psychiatrist can help me. I told you I need a counterweight. I can only hope you are up to the task. My gut tells me you are."

Will's eyes hold Daniel's; his gaze is steady and darkly compelling. He can almost feel the clamor of Will's heartbeat superimposed on his own.

"And I was worried about the audition. Shit. You have to tell me everything, you know that."

“I intend to. That bottle of Beam is looking pretty good about now, isn’t it?”

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Bedelia indulges her sexual fantasies in her hot tub. At least until she is interrupted...

Chapter 9

Bedelia relaxes in her hot tub. Not for long.

Du Maurier stares out of the kitchen window of her home, gazing at the birds fluttering and preening around the rustic stone bird bath. She switches the phone to her other ear, but within seconds the other ear is burning hot as well.

"I am so pleased Lydia is being released from the hospital today. Of course home is where she belongs…I agree group therapy is not a feasible option at this time."

Lydia's mother continues to chirp at the other end, repeating what the doctors had told her about her daughter's relapse and suicide attempt for what seemed an interminable amount of time but, as Du Maurier glances at her watch, has really only been a quarter of an hour.

Fourteen minutes too long she decides.

"May I ask when you would like me to visit?" Du Maurier interrupts.

The chirping becomes pleading. Du Maurier sets down her glass of afternoon pinot grigio and considers her nails. She skipped her last manicure for another patient's crisis last week. At least that debacle had been interesting.

The death of a loved one always proved difficult to accept, even if the loved one was a cat. Weeks after the pet's demise, the patient had refused to let the animal die. The cat spoke to him, quite literally, beyond the grave, at least according to her patient. Du Maurier had been hard pressed to decide which was more bizarre; that the patient insisted he saw his dead cat, or that it spoke to him.

"Well, of course, if you think my presence necessary for her recovery. I'll pack a bag and leave in the morning. I have some arrangements to make if this is an extended stay…no, no, Lydia is very dear to me. It's no imposition at all. I'll see you tomorrow then."

Du Maurier hangs up, swirls the wine as she makes a mental list of the arrangements she must make to spend some time in Fiesole.

By the time Du Maurier has cleared her calendar, phoned the appropriate services she employs to manage her residence including the security company, the afternoon has gone. She opens up another bottle of wine and slips half a 5mg valium between her lips.

She lights the candles surrounding her hot tub, admiring the ambiance the flickering flames create inside the secluded terrace that encloses the swirling in ground marble pool complete with headrests and wide flat steps that faithfully accommodate unsure feet and dazed brains. All she has left to do is pack.

She unbuttons her blouse, unzips her skirt and slips both articles off. Seconds later, bra, hose, and panties lie on the floor and Du Maurier eases herself into the warm pool and tilts her head back to rest upon the curve of the cool marble.

Her impeccable sleuthing on one Dr. Clayton has been most rewarding. A complete dossier rests on her dining room table, ready for Hannibal when she decides to give it to him. Young Dr. Daniel Barclay Clayton is as financially and academically endowed as he is physically.

He apparently graduated with degrees from Johns Hopkins and completed a short residency there before assuming a most prestigious associate's position in Florence. His curriculum vitae indicated published and peer reviewed research on the therapeutic applications of canines and their ability to empathize with their humans. He has given lectures and been invited to speak at a few psychiatric seminars.

She gathers the oil from beside the pool and massages her arms and legs first, saving torso for later. The fragrance of almonds and musk fill the air.

She wonders why she has never come across him before. He is certainly memorable enough. Then again, he has been practicing in Italy and she…has not. His particular area of psychology will make contact with him easier. Lydia has developed a need for alternative therapy. A new puppy will be just what the doctor orders and Du Maurier now knows a colleague who can assist.

Although moderately wealthy, he keeps a modest residence in Fiesole, and lives alone with his two dogs. Personal information was unremarkable. His family in the states offered no insight.

With the exception of psychiatric seminars, his life is tied to his immediate community. He works. He walks his dogs. He goes to the gym. He goes home. He does this every day. On weekends, he tends his vegetable garden and indulges in a little landscaping. He listens to an eclectic assortment of music played loudly when outside, other times he nods his head in time to whatever he listens to through the earbuds. Some evenings, he plays his piano and occasionally even takes out his violin. He is an accomplished musician. This has been his routine for three weeks.

Conveniently, he is a member of a local gym under the same franchise who owns the gym Du Maurier joined in Siena. She can use her card at any location and use it she has. She has watched Clayton work with his trainer once a week, perform his sets of weight lifting and interval workouts, and run his half hour on the treadmill all while listening to his music, lost in his own mind and unaware of Du Maurier's surveillance of him.

She knows he frequents a pool near his home and she has decided she will introduce herself there. She can confer with him about Lydia; perhaps even persuade him to dinner.

Until then, she can visualize him here, in the tub with her. She lets the carved lip of the marble rest cradle her head, her limbs floating pleasantly on the jets of water. She sinks into a blissful haze conjuring images of green eyes and sensuous mouth, sculpted abdominals, and perfectly swollen cock and balls. Her oil laden fingers wander over her skin, stroking and pressing in a familiar rhythm, her blood pulsing in response.

There is a soft rustling sound at the edge of the tub. Her eyelids flutter open enough to see a lean figure in profile slowly stripping off the cummerbund of an immaculate tuxedo, his soft curls, gently sloping nose, and signature stubble visible in the candlelight. She watches him kick off his shoes and send them tumbling across the tiled floor, then socks. He strips off each component of the suit, eyes lowered and motions measured until a very nude Will Graham stands at the edge of the marble tub, skin pale and perfect as the marble itself save for the raised scar threading across his abdomen.

Her eyes savor him in his nakedness. She is drawn to the thatch of dark hair that curls from his navel down to the erect cock curving up from between his thighs. As he gazes down at her, poised at the edge of blue veined marble, he seems the most beautiful man Du Maurier has ever laid eyes upon.

The wide blue eyes drink her in slowly and Du Maurier feels her body temperature rise even more. His mouth opens slightly, not so much a smile but pink lips part in an audible exhale as he places one foot and then the other into the pool and sinks down into the swirling jets of water. He steals glances at Du Maurier from the other side of the tub, arms resting along the edges of the pool accentuating the muscled shoulders, the definition of the collar bone and the pectorals, nipples bloom russet against the pale skin, erect and glistening.

She beckons to him with one finger and he inclines his head. He slides in beside her and their eyes meet. Du Maurier wants to be undone by those eyes and that mouth. Eyes still open, she tilts her head back in invitation, lays her throat bare to him. His fingers find her throat and the caresses are soft and sure. Lips graze along her skin and teeth nuzzle then prick their way to her mouth. The pressure against her throat is intoxicating.

Soon his fingers are caressing her cheeks and chin as she lies pinned beneath him his body slick, his cock hard. The sensation of a taut male body sliding over her is enough to cause her to arch her back to receive more of that luscious maleness between her legs. She presses her hips against him as his hips grind and he slides his cock teasingly against her clit. She feels his mouth upon hers; searching, pulling at her lower lip with his teeth, tongue forceful and hungry dancing against her own.

Silky skin glides across hers, his body solid and tight in all the right places. And while she cannot get enough of his mouth, she longs to feel his tongue slick over her, explore every inch of her. She writhes beneath him and he seems to intuit what she wants. She feels his mouth cover the nipple of her exposed breast as he cups the other in his warm slippery hand. The tender biting sends shivers through her body and she can feel the swell of anticipation twitching below. The jets of water hum, the tingle of bubbles along her back and legs sends her trembling with the tortuous gnawing of her nipples, mercilessly and alternately caught between Graham’s teeth and fingers.

Soon, they are on the chaise lounge, cushions and towels soaking wet as are they, tangled and dripping over each other, limbs entwined like vines. She feels the drag of his tongue across her navel delighting in the warm slick tracks he makes across her perfumed skin. She can hardly stand it as his mouth parts the wet lips between her legs and she quivers to the touch of tongue and teeth as he consumes her. He bites her inner thigh, hard enough to bruise, but not break skin. She rocks her hips in response, opens her legs wider.

He accepts the invitation, lips tracing higher, administering tiny nips causing her to gasp and flinch in delight. When his mouth reaches the tender joint between thigh and pelvis, she feels a shudder of pain as teeth clamp down catching skin and holding tight. She squirms. He sucks. She feels a trickle of blood and then the brush of wet tongue along the tender folds of flesh. Her legs tense and she arches into him, grabbing his hair as she rises from the lounge chair, pleasure and release tortuously sweet.

Her soft moans reverberate and she hardly sounds like herself. Will's face remains between her legs, his mouth, that beautiful mouth still pressing against her clit as she rides his tongue in the wake of the little quivers that course through her.

"Dr. Du Maurier?" The voice is not Graham's.

Graham raises his head as though he hears the familiar voice, too. His eyes grow dark as he pushes himself off of her, his attentions already somewhere else…

"Dr. Du Maurier?"

Du Maurier opens her eyes to find Hannibal leaning over her in the pool. He is fully dressed with a plush towel draped over one arm. The towel is clearly meant for her. He holds it out so that she can step into it should she decide to get up from the pool.

Her legs feel like rubber bands and she wonders how long he has been standing over her. By the look on his face, he has been standing there far longer than she has patience for. She licks at her lips, her mouth is dry. She takes a rather hearty gulp of her wine before she speaks.

"Hannibal. Have you forgotten our boundaries?" She says softly adopting the tone of detachment she requires to remove herself from the intimacy of a moment ago.

"Not at all. I became concerned when no one answered your door. This was the only entrance I could find. Did you dismiss your staff?" He actually turns his head around as though looking for them. Du Maurier is not amused.

"A change of scheduling." Du Maurier says as she moves around the pool to the steps and slowly ascends into Hannibal's waiting arms. She allows him to wrap the towel around her effectively cloaking her diminutive form from Hannibal's predatory gaze. She wills her body to stop flinching at his touch.

"It was my intention to be alone this evening." Du Maurier says, shaking out her hair.

"You were far from alone just now. Who was with you in the hot tub?" Hannibal asks, smiling.

Du Maurier wants to slap him, a curious impulse she does not experience often, but lately Hannibal has provoked the most troubling of impulses in her. She smiles instead and leans down to retrieve her nearly empty wine glass.

"Shall we?" She gestures toward the patio adjacent to the terrace where a thick robe and more wine await far from the hot tub.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

After meeting Graham at the Baltimore State Hospital, she had understood how Hannibal found him fascinating. There had been something alluring about Graham's peculiar mix of vulnerability and charm masking a chilling malevolence that was not unfamiliar to her. A very complicated package Will Graham, most delicately if not loosely wrapped.

Chapter 10

Du Maurier handles Hannibal. Hannibal lets her think that.

"I won't be long." Du Maurier picks up the damp towel from the floor to take with her. She had let it drop to the patio floor only after wrapping herself up in the robe she holds tightly around herself, a futile gesture. She may as well still be naked. Her every movement, every twitch is being studied by cool dark eyes, that flicker with cruel curiosity. She leaves her glass, and musters something like affection to glimmer in her eyes, soften the creases of her brow as she glances at Hannibal before leaving him on the patio.

Hannibal nods. He knows he has disarmed her, but only momentarily. She will be back in her element soon enough. He is certain she was not thinking about him as she had moaned and gasped in the hot tub, fingers upon her breasts and hips jerking out of the water like a fish strangled on a hook. She had shuddered in her orgasm without even touching herself. That was some impressive imagery indeed and Hannibal is more than curious about who could inspire such abandon in Du Maurier.

Du Maurier needs a few minutes away from the distracting gaze that crawls over her skin, erasing the warm and pleasant sensations of a moment ago. She walks through the dining room on her way to her bedroom, retrieves the dossier from the table. Assures herself Hannibal has not seen it, here in the dark, far from the terrace and the hot tub.

This evening's fantasy is not the first time she has imagined herself with Graham, but it is the first time she has permitted her imagination to overtake her. She considers that there is more to her fantasy making than valium and wine.

After meeting Graham at the Baltimore State Hospital, she had understood how Hannibal found him fascinating. There had been something alluring about Graham's peculiar mix of vulnerability and charm masking a chilling malevolence that was not unfamiliar to her. A very complicated package Will Graham, most delicately if not loosely wrapped.

Du Maurier had never wished Graham any harm. It was his misfortune to fall within Hannibal's sphere of influence. He was a threat, plain and simple. Hannibal could only see the dangerous darkness dwelling behind those pale blue eyes. Always seeking the dark had blinded him to the light in those same eyes, light that would not be extinguished by Hannibal. Hannibal imagined that darkness was akin to his own, but it was not. Graham had the potential for violence, certainly, but that violence would always be tempered by his own sense of morality. And for that, he was unpredictable because his morality was situational not absolute.

Even if through his own sheer will, Hannibal managed to persuade Graham to join him in some partnership, they would be at each other’s throats eventually. It is the nature of the beast to be solitary. Even if they hunted together, Graham would always chafe under Hannibal’s staggering ego. Pupils eventually outgrow their teachers. When that happened, Graham would cease to be the object of affection he now was. Companionship with Graham as Hannibal wished was a fantasy.

Then again, perhaps she did not understand the true nature of their relationship since Hannibal had only ever told her half-truths, as he had sat in his patient chair in her living room. She suspects that beneath the calm exterior lies a simmering attraction to Graham that transcends any boundaries she is aware of. Whatever he had been doing with Graham had endeared the young man to him so much that even in betrayal, Hannibal had not found it within himself to end him.

She has never inspired that kind of *obsession* in Hannibal. She cannot fathom what it is that Graham has that she does not. The process of corruption is always seductive, but innocence once lost, remains so forever. Graham is no longer innocent and has been corrupted beyond repair. Why does Hannibal persist?

Perhaps Graham is worthy of further study. Perhaps the threat he poses could be neutralized. Perhaps trying to avoid the topic of Graham has been misguided and it might be wise to take a more therapeutic approach. Du Maurier might even be able to persuade Hannibal to reveal the true nature of his attraction to Graham. That is exactly the sort of insight that Du Maurier needs. She is more curious now than ever if Hannibal will be able to rip apart the doctor who looks so much like Graham.

Du Maurier adjusts the volume a little louder on the radio. She opens her closet to select something appropriate for slipping into Hannibal’s mind.

Hannibal sits with legs crossed on one of the black wrought iron chairs that complete the antique looking ensemble Du Maurier has procured for her patio. Each of the chairs is a singular work of art, the metal forged and hammered into a different animal motif. Hannibal chose the cobra, of course. Du Maurier would expect that of him. The hanging flowers, all pastel lavender and pink lend a decidedly rustic, albeit feminine touch to the otherwise elegant arrangement.

He likes Du Maurier’s house. It is sumptuous, full of color and aromas. From the carefully distributed floral arrangements to the scented candles, the ambiance is tone perfect. Almost too perfect, like Du Maurier herself. She is very much an extension of her residence, or rather her residence reflects her own carefully crafted visage.

Hannibal is aware he emulates her taste and style in many ways and wonders why she never mentions it. Imitation is the best form of flattery. It has been Du Maurier who, over the past several years, has presented Hannibal with the perfect model of behavior to imitate as he prowls among polite society, ever the wolf among sheep. His blatant adoption of her own mannerisms in her presence never seems to register though Hannibal never tires of goading her.

Du Maurier’s taste in décor has always provided him with inspiration, with the aesthetic to offset his own predilection for the darkly humorous and inappropriate. In Baltimore, it was not uncommon for Hannibal to insert pieces of his own among the actual art objects in his home simply to see if anyone noticed. It was always gratifying when the rare guest actually understood the joke.

None discerned the sly cannibalistic references for what they were. Some would raise a brow in shock before dismissing the idea believing that in their own vulgarity they had merely misinterpreted the intent of the piece somehow. Surely Doctor Lecter would not be so untoward as to condone such wanton carnality or depravity let alone display it in his home. They invariably decided they had somehow missed the point, always seeking the metaphor rather than accept the literal.

Most did not possess the intellect or curiosity to analyze his selections to even that extent. Most were only concerned with how much he had paid for this or that.

Hannibal's mind recedes into his memory palace while he awaits Du Maurier's return to the patio. She is miffed and so, will take her precious time doing whatever it is she is doing. His palace opens into his Baltimore home where he maintains many pleasant memories of a life he misses deeply and he still feels himself robbed of it.

Hannibal pours himself another glass of the tasty wine. Why not? The pale amber liquid feels cool in his throat, cleansing his palate of the tasteless meal he had prepared earlier. He had found the meat wanting, but perhaps it was his own preparation that had been uninspired. Then again, finding an edible section without a tattoo had been impossible…and the organs, well, it was a fallacy that only the good died young.

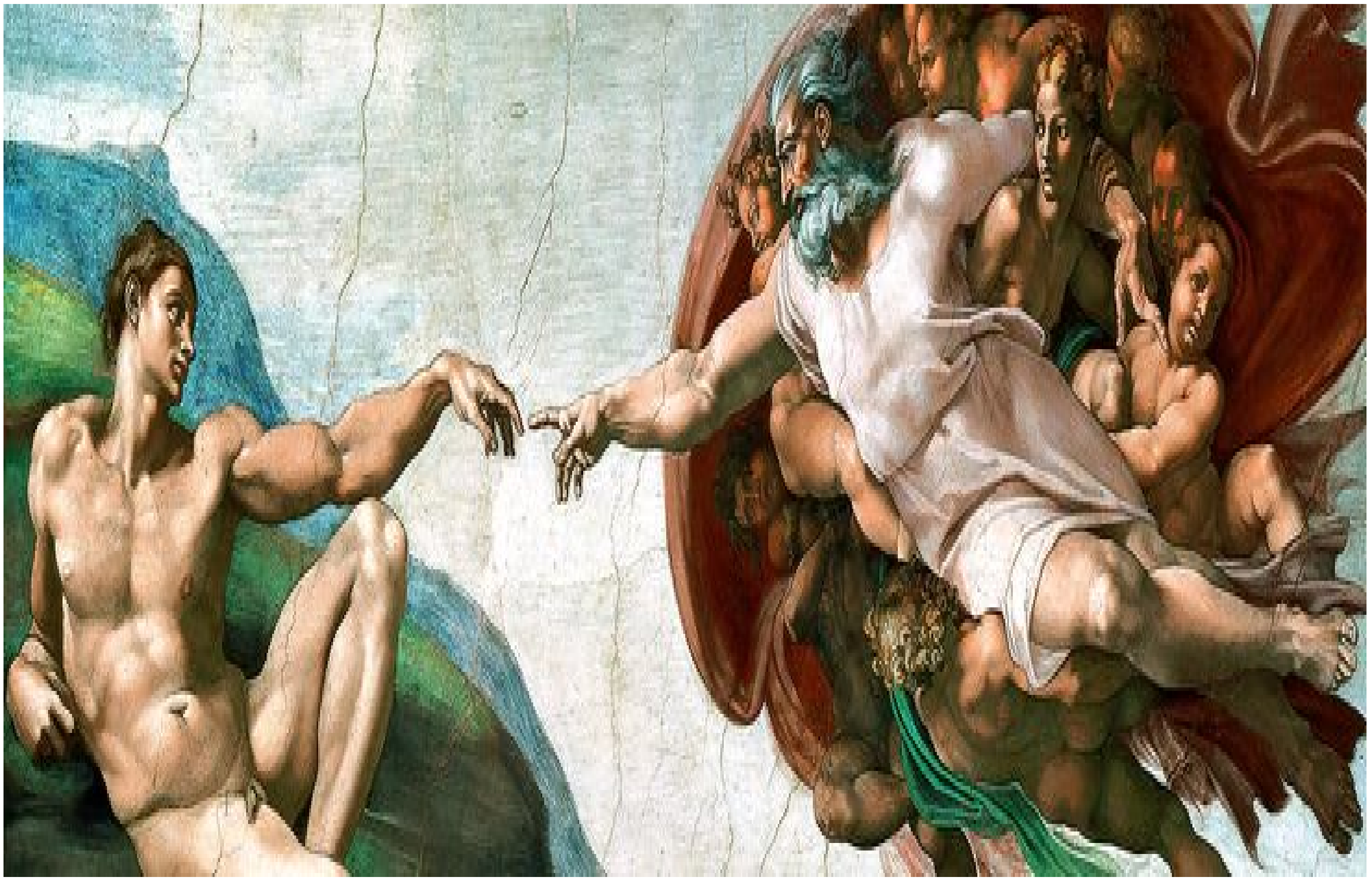
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Only Will had truly appreciated the peculiar ironies embedded in the displays of the art in his Baltimore home as only Will could. Hannibal's perverted sense of humor had caused the young profiler to twist his face up more than once. Indeed, Hannibal had displayed some of the work especially for Will.

Chapter Notes

I included images of the paintings Hannibal talks about in his memory palace. The Japanese print he refers to is my imagination, but I can imagine Hannibal entertaining himself at Will's and Alana's expense. Thanks to blktuana for advice on uploading. Totally my idea to have Hannibal rework fine art pieces to suit his own sense of humor and aesthetics.



Chapter 11

Hannibal muses in his memory palace.

Hannibal remembers one dinner party, several years back, when a matronly guest had stumbled upon his reinterpretation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in a back room, a place she had no business being anyway. Curiosity kills the cat. The room was nondescript; a storeroom to keep unopened cases of beer, wine, and assorted spirits, clearly dated and rotated accordingly. Perhaps she had intended to inspect the stemware and other crystal pieces that were stored back there.

Whatever she had come for was soon forgotten as she had stood speechless staring at the far wall where Hannibal's oeuvre hung in all its sanctimonious glory.

Hannibal remembers still the dazed look on her face as she had stared quizzically at the reimagined scene, so similar to the original except that the Almighty was as nude as Adam and Adam had an erection worthy of man, not the tiny pathetic nub of flaccid flesh Michelangelo had bestowed upon him. The woman had backed out of the room turning at the last moment to stumble into Hannibal.

"You know this area is off limits to guests. You have been very rude. Now what is to be done about that?" Hannibal remembers saying while shaking finger at her. The look on her face had been priceless as Hannibal had pressed another glass of champagne into her hands and had guided her back to the main foyer. He had kept the room locked after that.

Hannibal had taken a leisurely three weeks to decide upon the perfect recipe for her, a pappardelle with lamb ragu. This was a wicked little Sicilian variation on the French ragout, the combination of mint and crushed red pepper flakes a treat on the tongue.

Hannibal cannot help himself, even now. His villa, an hour away in Impruneta, while not as ostentatious as his Baltimore home, is replete with museum worthy art and artifacts alongside tasteful reproductions often displayed in the most incongruous of places. An astute observer might question the owner's penchant for disturbingly grotesque and violently sadistic renderings littered among the sedate and genuine pieces.

Many of the compositions were painted or drawn by Hannibal's own hands. He looks down at his hands feeling a swell of pride. He shakes his head, marvels silently at the things he has done with these hands.

Hannibal regrets he has few visitors these days. He misses the grand parties he used to host and the attention that accompanied them. His parties used to earn mention in the local gossip columns and even the society pages of the Baltimore Sun Times. He would trade all of those parties for just one visitor in particular.

Only Will had truly appreciated the peculiar ironies embedded in the displays of the art in his Baltimore home as only Will could. Hannibal's perverted sense of humor had caused the young profiler to twist his face up more than once. Indeed, Hannibal had displayed some of the work especially for Will.

But not at first. It had taken time for Will to move about his home as though he belonged there. As though Will belonged anywhere else.

Despite Will's investigative prowess, Hannibal had never once given a second thought to allowing him nearly free reign in his home. He had practically invited Will to discover the Chesapeake Ripper hiding in plain sight in front of him.

Hannibal sips at his wine, remembers how Will had been reluctant to touch his things for quite some time, preferring to twist his head and body around the object that had caught his attention rather than disturb it. Will had not been concerned about fingerprints; he was respectful and perhaps slightly intimidated by the cost, but that too had endeared him to Hannibal.

Gradually, Will began showing up on his own. He had presented a bottle of wine after closing the Silvestri case, in gratitude for Hannibal's help. He had burst in during his dinner with Tobias Budge. And there had been the strained dinner they had shared with Freddie Lounds and Abigail.

Whether for the extraordinary coffee or the company, Will had finally started coming around early mornings after learning that Hannibal never slept in. Remarkably, Will had managed to avoid running into Hannibal as he was returning from a night of mayhem, sometimes by mere minutes. Hannibal had sensed the loneliness Will was reluctant to articulate, but was plain enough in the way Will sat relaxed in his kitchen, fingers curled around his mug, content to breathe in the silence, or close to it as Hannibal puttered around his kitchen.

Later, once Will had felt more at ease, Hannibal had watched him roaming his halls and rooms as though strolling in a gallery. There had been rooms forbidden to Will, and Will had never been so impolite as to inquire why they remained locked. Hannibal smiles to himself. Locked doors would always prick Will's curiosity, a completely open house would be uninteresting and that simply would not do.

Thinking Hannibal in his kitchen, Will had taken to wandering around his house, wine glass in hand examining each and every piece, probably committing all to memory. He would stop every now and then and Hannibal would observe a slow grin emerge or the surprise of raised eyebrows accompanied by a muffled if not amused laugh. Will had been particularly tickled by Hannibal's placement of Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Children* over the freezer in the rear pantry.

It was only after Will had shared his bed that Hannibal had sent him into the locked storeroom containing the *Creation* with the key for a bottle of Rothschild Bordeaux. Hannibal remembers clearly standing over the sink, rinsing green leaves of Romaine listening to the clink of the key turn the lock, the click of the light switch, and then the sound of Will's voice from the depths of the storage room.

"Hannibal!"

Hannibal closes his eyes, feels the same contented smile spread warmly across his face as he remembers Will returning from the storeroom, wine bottle in one hand as he had stood before the center island, fingers roaming absently over stubble covered chin and soft lips in the most maddening way. "Hannibal…" he had said again, with affection this time.

Will had rarely called Hannibal by his given name, but when he had, each syllable was delivered in a cadence uniquely his own. The subtle variations of tone would catch in Hannibal's chest like a favorite melody, a song he could never hear often enough. Hannibal wonders if Will ever knew his voice had that effect on him, if Will had ever really understood how deeply he had plucked the very fibers of Hannibal's being by merely saying his name.

Once, wandering around in a pair of Hannibal's pajamas, unable to sleep, Will had ventured up to the third floor. Finding a room of draped canvases had piqued his curiosity and he could not resist pulling down the dusty fabric from each one. Hannibal had watched Will sift through the various art works, some from local artists, some actual pieces purchased from auction houses, and some original work. Will's eyes had moved slowly over each one, taking his time, silently appraising not the value, but the allure for Hannibal, seeking to find the man in each. More pieces of the puzzle to analyze, connect, and appreciate.

He had left the largest canvas in the room for last. He had nearly drawn blood from his own lips trying to keep a straight face as he had gazed upon a scaled down version of Dali's majestic *Sacrament of the Last Supper*, intended as an homage to the Golden Mean and Plato, except Hannibal had imbued it with a more earthly corporeal twist.

Hannibal had watched Will crouch down for a better look. His fingers had moved across the canvas over the figures of the apostles and Christ, their faces and robes smeared with splatters of red, generous chunks of fleshy pink meat with a side of organs arranged in a banquet beneath the fingers of Christ.

"Take, eat; this is my body…" Hannibal had said to him from the doorway.

Will had half turned to the sound of Hannibal's voice, "Sacrament or seduction?"

"Why not both?" Hannibal had answered.

Hannibal wonders if Will had figured out that he had not used actual paint.

Caravaggio's *Still Life with Fruit* had also brought a smirk to Will's lips. The painting itself was not amusing, but Hannibal's choice of where to hang it was. Will had been contemplating the print of overripe and suggestive summer fruit, as he had stood naked, taking a long leak, relieving himself of the belly full of wine he had just drunk, in Hannibal's master bedroom. The irony of a study in decay and a commentary on the transitory nature of life hanging over the toilet as he had flushed it had not gone unnoticed.

The image of Caravaggio's toga wearing *Bacchus* reflected in the mirror over the bathroom sink had not escaped Will's attention either. Hannibal had always appreciated the crude humanity of Caravaggio, and this rendering was especially crude. Caravaggio had posed his young and very debauched god before another basket of rotting yet evocative fruit as he proffers a glass of wine in one hand while grasping the neck of the wine flask in the other. It was not coincidental that this Bacchus was endowed with arched brows that framed half lidded eyes beneath curls of dark hair.

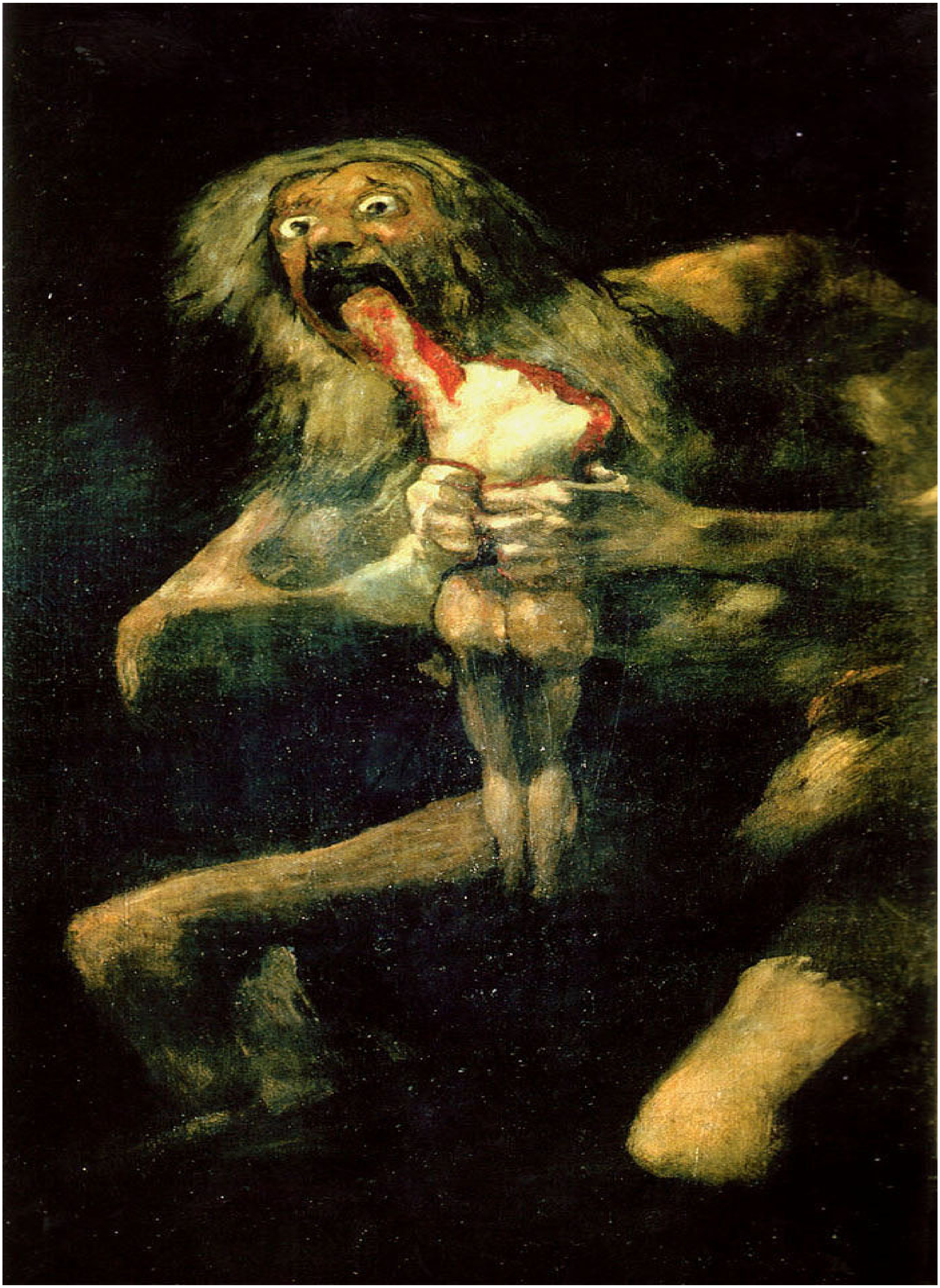
While washing his hands, Will's gaze had wandered. The instant Will's eyes had flicked to the mirror and his tongue had clicked against the roof of his mouth, Hannibal had been beside himself. Will had snapped up a crisp towel to wring his hands dry, a long suffering sigh and indulgent smile on his lips.

Hannibal wanders into the dining room of his Baltimore residence, a most favorite place in his memory palace. Hannibal fondly remembers Will biting his tongue and rolling his eyes dolefully at Hannibal over the dinner table as none other than Alana Bloom had sat dining with them, blissfully unaware, or in stubborn denial of the Japanese prints behind her. One of a petal pink flower shaped like a vulva glistening with drops of dew paired with the equally suggestive print by the same artist of two stiff white lilies, stamen and stigma erect and also dripping with morning dew.

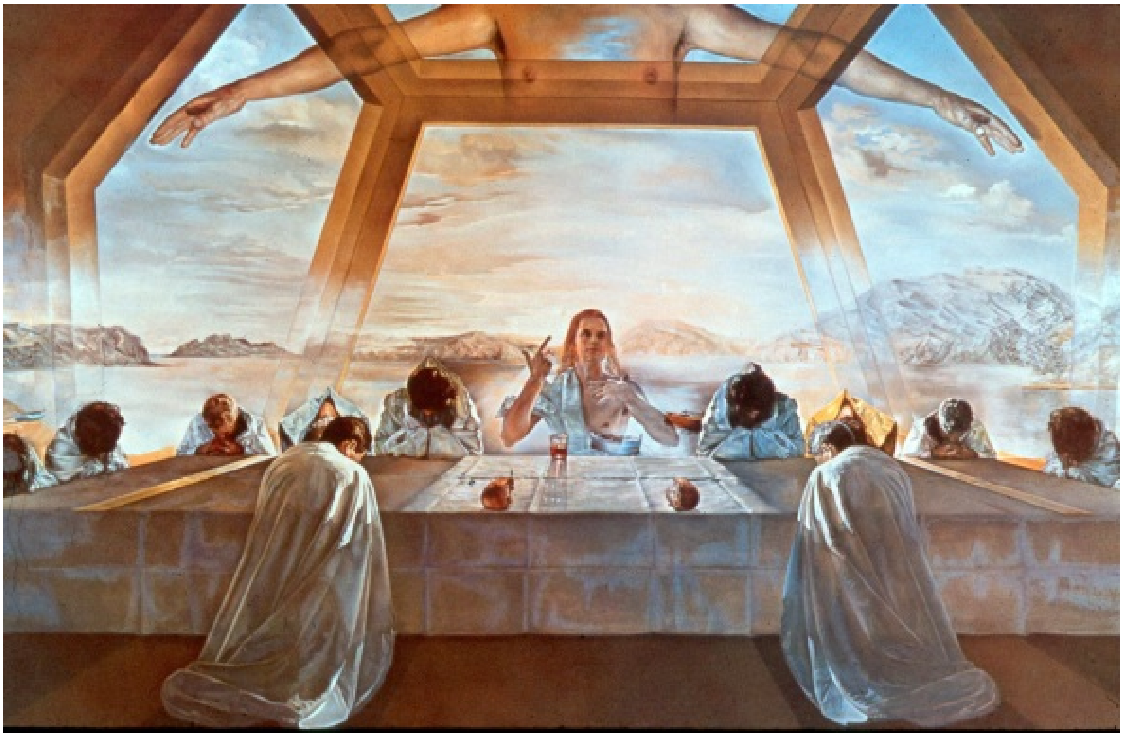
Even Uncle Jack had bestowed only cursory glances, his cluttered mind overloaded with his cancer ridden wife and homicide du jour. In Jack’s defense, he had come for the food. Crawford was not shy about his appetite or about insinuating himself. Hannibal often wonders if the elusive ingredients of his culinary creations had really bothered Jack. Crawford never turned down a meal and always cleaned his plate, sometimes twice.

The wretched wound Will has carved into his heart feels cavernous now as Hannibal moves through his memory palace. And yet, Hannibal cannot stay away. Too many rooms in his palace are filled with Will and Hannibal cannot bring himself to tear them down. Neither can he board them up. Like Will himself, they are a part of him now.

Hannibal withdraws from his memory palace. He senses Du Maurier approaching, the scent of her perfume catches in Hannibal’s nose before he hears the soft padding of her bare feet against the hardwood floor. It would not do for her to catch him wandering in his palace, yet again.



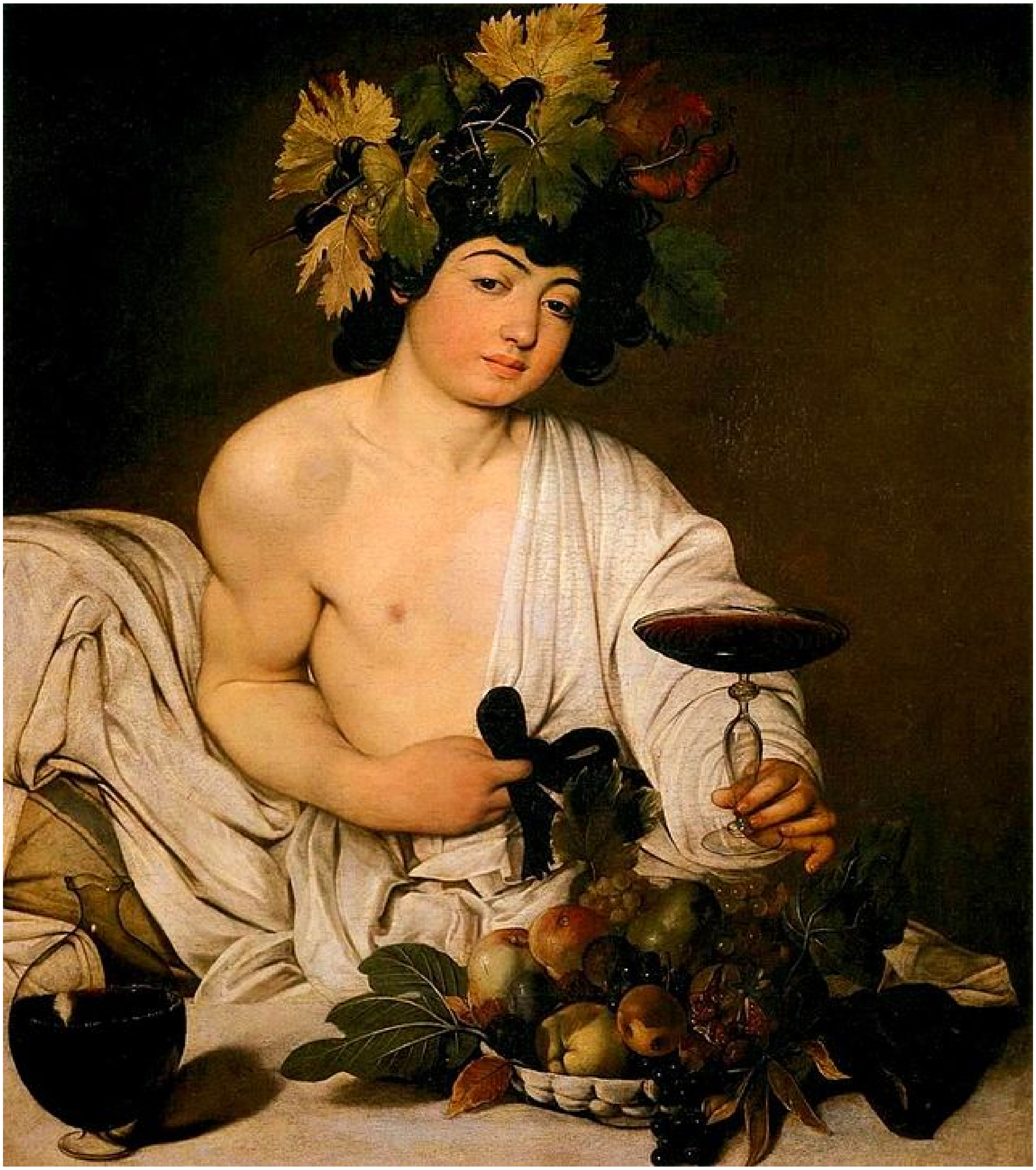
Goya, Saturn Devouring His Children



Dali Last Supper

Caravaggio Still Life with Fruit

Caravaggio Still Life with Fruit



Caravaggio Bacchus

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The vipers circle one another, each looking for weakness and insight.

Chapter Notes

Will post more chapters this weekend. My finger splint comes off next week. Yeah...

Chapter 12

Hannibal explains his visit to Du Maurier's house at this late hour.

Hannibal finishes his glass of wine; it is a local vintage from Fiesole he notes on the label. He has never been to Fiesole although the town is a stone's throw from Florence. But the wine is quite good and Hannibal is at a loss as to how the vineyard managed to escape his attention. He considers the proprietors must have a reserve cellar worth investigating.

Du Maurier returns to the patio having exchanged the robe for lingerie. She wears a pale turquoise Dolce tank camisole with matching bottoms gathered seductively at her hips revealing taut belly and silky skin. Her blonde tresses are nearly dry. Her feet are uncharacteristically bare, but Hannibal thinks the buffed and polished toenails framing dainty toes are more seductive than any slipper.

She nods at Hannibal to pour another glass for himself as she slides into her own wrought iron chair, this one with lion's head and claws.

Hannibal refills his glass and hesitates over Du Maurier's. She shakes her head but her fingers remain wrapped around the stem, slender knuckles all but white against the delicate blown glass.

"We were about to discuss your overactive imagination." Hannibal says nose to glass, sampling the bouquet before taking another generous swallow of the golden hued wine.

"No, you were about to inquire rather intrusively about my sexual fantasies, Hannibal." Du Maurier says flatly.

Hannibal sighs and sips again at the delicious wine. "Were you drinking this vintage while in the hot tub? If so I would like a case of it."

Du Maurier resists the temptation to roll her eyes. "The vineyard is one of the oldest in Tuscany. One of my patients is a member of the family who owns it. I might be persuaded to procure a case or two of the more rarefied vintages they offer."

“That would be appreciated. And please, my earlier comments were not intended to be intrusive, merely humorous.”

“Well, you need to work on your sense of humor, Hannibal. No harm done. One cannot take offense where none has been offered.” She smiles and inclines her head. Slowly, she slides her empty glass toward Hannibal. A gesture of forgiveness. She will now share a glass with him in the shadow of his apology.

Hannibal is all too familiar with Du Maurier’s techniques but appreciates her attempts at conditioning nonetheless. That she continues to try means she still cares. He graciously refills her glass.

“What brings you to my door so late, Hannibal?” Her nose hovers over her glass. Hannibal notes the widening of nostrils as she inhales and the dilating of pupils as she speaks.

A direct question. Hannibal has a direct answer. “I require your access code to our joint account at Banque Suisse and your permission.”

“This is sudden. To what end?” Her pupils shrink and the brilliant blue of her eyes turns crystal.

“There are some stocks and property deeds I would like to transfer. Rather bequeath.”

“Hannibal…is there something medically wrong?” Hannibal cannot tell if she is actually apprehensive or merely anticipative.

“No. This is about moving on.” Hannibal’s fingers tremble ever so slightly as he sets down his wine glass. The sharp clink of the crystal against the inlaid tile of the table causes Du Maurier to blink. He stares out over the darkened lawn that lies beyond the patio.

“Tell me…” Du Maurier cannot imagine what could possibly distress Hannibal like this. Whatever he tells her will have but a kernel of truth to it, but his distress seems genuine.

“As you are aware, and you leave no doubt that you are very aware, I have found it difficult to let go of Will. After careful consideration, I think that I would like to legally deed property to him and leave some stocks to him, in an escrow account, anonymously of course. I do not need to know where he is, but my lawyers can ensure that his lawyers have access to these holdings in the event he should ever need them. Or want them…”

Du Maurier does not know what to say. Each of them has accounts all over the planet but the joint account in Switzerland holds the most lucrative investments of their amassed fortunes. The account was intended as a merger of convenience and later, a means to check one another, keep each of them from rash impulses. Should one of them die without disclosing his or her code to the other, the entire bulk of the fortune would forfeit to the bank. No force on earth could make the bank hand anything over to the survivor on the account. Unless the survivor wanted to rob the insanely secure bank, there would be no access.

Unless one was so intent on removing the other those monetary considerations did not matter…

“You mean to put him behind you and assuage your conscience with gifts?” she asks.

“It is not a matter of conscience, but of a sense of responsibility. I failed him. I owe him… something before I can fully embrace a life here.”

“What stocks and properties do you intend to give to him?” Du Maurier asks wondering how much Hannibal’s useless guilt and morose romanticism are going to cost her.

“The properties along the Chesapeake, of course. What could be more fitting? And some of that microchip stock or whatever it is.”

“Microsoft.” Du Maurier says quietly.

The relief is immediate. She pretends to consider for a moment. His choice of property is fitting perhaps, but excessive. He is proposing a substantial amount. The properties along the Chesapeake are valued in the millions and the stock, well stock goes up and it goes down. Still, if this means Hannibal is finally willing to leave Will Graham behind…she can have the dog loving doctor to herself. Or, perhaps he would present as the ultimate test of Hannibal’s intentions.

How revealing it would be if Hannibal were to believe, if only for an instant that he was seeing Graham. If she could arrange a meeting that would allow her to observe Hannibal’s reaction, before he had the chance to keep his person suit from coming apart at the seams in front of her.

Her blue eyes glitter at the thought and she turns her eyes on Hannibal, allows them to deepen with concern and compassion. She closes her eyes as though carefully considering the words about to fall from practiced lips.

“Hannibal. Are you certain you want to do this? Do you honestly believe that this monetary gesture, generous though it is, will be enough to bring you closure?”

“I am comfortable with the decision. It is time to let him go. If he had wanted to contact me he could have done so before now. He is clever and would have found a way.” Hannibal says and his eyes seem to shimmer with the pain of resignation. His clipped tone devoid of any nuance is imbued with a sense of finality, perhaps even a hint of indignation and wounded pride.

Hannibal lifts his head and manages a weak smile at Du Maurier to reassure her that his intentions are genuine. He decides tears, even one, would be too much, so he contents himself with the heartbreaking Mozart aria he loves, summoning the requisite moisture immediately.

The version of Hannibal that sits before her is difficult to analyze. He is capable of mimicking human emotion as expertly as Du Maurier. And why not? He learned from the best. His meticulously constructed suit borrows elements of her own. The only way to determine the truth is to let this charade play out.

“How much stock do you want to bestow upon Will Graham?” she asks as she swallows another gulp of crisp wine in anticipation of more lies singed with truths smothered in deceit.

Later, Hannibal hums to the music selection playing loudly in his car, Beethoven’s *Appassionata*. The last time he listened to this, it had been above the din of the band saw cutting strips of flesh from Beverly Katz. Hannibal had had to play it over, having been unable to hear his favorite sections the first time around.

He drives through the Italian countryside back to Impruneta, to his villa, where Tatiana, the talented Sicilian who speaks five languages impressively, including the French and German spoken in Switzerland, sits before her computer, intercepting an important phone call and taking down Du Maurier’s bank information and access code as he shifts gears in his black Jaguar XK Coupe. He flips open his phone and pulls up his picture files. He glances at the dossier on some psychiatrist by the name of Clayton. Hannibal figures he knows who Du Maurier was thinking about.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Will receives a call from D’Angelo, visits his own memory palace, and sends Luciano and Lucia on a mission.

How deep into the rabbit hole did he fall? No, Will corrects himself; I jumped down it all by myself. Didn’t I?
Will had known about the conditioning. He had accepted it as part of the price of catching Hannibal. What he had not guessed was the breadth and scope of it.

Chapter 13

Will receives a call from D’Angelo, visits his own memory palace, and sends Luciano and Lucia on a mission.

The ring of Will’s phone disrupts the sunny solitude of Will’s kitchen. The unexpected intrusion interrupts Will’s breakfast. He puts down his forkful of cheese omelet and picks up his phone from the table.

It’s the Firenze Police Department. Will has not been to any more crime scenes. He wonders what D’Angelo wants now. It has to be her.

“Hello.”

“Mr. Graham? Buongiorno.” D’Angelo’s voice is friendly and therefore an obvious omen of unpleasantness thinks Will.

“What can I do for you today, Detective?” Will says, his tone indicating he would rather be doing anything else.

D’Angelo ignores him. “Just a quick question. Are you working with the Paolini twins?”

That was certainly quick. Will can’t think of a good reason to lie and catching him in a lie later will do him no good. He decides he would like to keep her opinion of him as favorable as possible.

“Yes, but I didn’t know they were twins. Huh…” Will can’t decide if that makes the innuendo between them more or less repulsive. “Why do you want to know?”

Will wonders what they have done and how much trouble he is in for whatever it is.

“It has come to my attention, that one or both of them have been snooping around the last several crime scenes. It was brought to my attention by our captain.”

“And this is a courtesy call.”

“Yes, it is. So far, there is nothing to connect them to you. If they show up again I have been instructed to interrogate them. They are not unknown in certain circles. Their family is oh, how do you say it…well connected.”

“Like the Corleones.” Will says.

“Hmmm. Not that well connected, but crime is a family trait.”

Will thinks a moment. “Is there anything to hold them on?”

“Obstruction charges might stick. Their family would pay up to get them out. But, you might be exposed in the process and I do not think you want that to get around.”

“No, I don’t.” Will thinks Mason would be the one paying up, and Will didn’t want that either.

“Is the entire family involved in your little enterprise, or just the twins?”

“I only employ the two of them. I didn’t know anything about their family until now.”

“And…how do you know them?” D’Angelo’s questions are becoming less courteous, and more nosey.

“A mutual friend recommended them and that’s all I have to say about it. I appreciate the heads up. I will tell them to lay off. That is what you want, isn’t it?”

“More or less. I was hoping you might be a little more open with me.”

“If the situation calls for it, maybe I will.” Will waits for her to ply him with more questions. But she does not.

“Bene.” She says, “Consider this your only warning and see that those two stop creeping around the precinct.”

“I will do that.”

Will hears the huff of her breathing, the sounds of faint voices in the background. Will imagines her sitting at her desk in the precinct office, a small but tidy desk shoved to a corner away from the cluster of desks that belong to the big boys. She so badly wants to play with them.

“We caught the killer of the pedophile priest. Cookies. Who would have thought?”

“The devil is in the details.” Will says.

“If I…had some questions about another case…some other devils, could I...? Would you…talk to me?”

Will sighs and lets her wait for his answer. He can appreciate what it feels like to be on the outside, existing on the periphery.

“Is there something going on now?” He says, glancing at his breakfast.

“No, nothing that would require your…particular insight. I wanted to uh, be comfortable if I called.”

“You mean when you call.” Will’s lips twist a little. He means his comment to be funny.

D’Angelo can’t see his smile but seems to understand Will’s humor. “Ai, when…So, it’s ok?”

“It’s ok. And…fino alla prossima volta.

“Sì, until next time, Mr. Graham. Ciao.”

Will clicks off his phone and stares at his plate. He imagines his omelet is tepid by now. He scoops it up onto his toast, also cold now, and makes a sandwich to finish off his coffee. He picks up his pen and writes down what he ate in the log he keeps for Daniel.

Will smiles as he writes, thinking he should include some dubious ingredients just to see if Daniel really reads his diet diary. Will thinks better of it, deciding that Daniel probably does take Will’s health as seriously as he says he does.

He is almost finished relating to Daniel all the events that have led him to Florence. Daniel had taken his notes while Will had described and explicated, pausing amidst requests from Daniel to discuss his feelings.

Daniel’s empathy made talking about things easier. He could feel what Will was feeling as he spoke, could understand the emotions driving the actions he described. His questions had been pointed, uncompromising, but framed with the gentleness Will had come to expect from him.

Will supposes that his empathic mirror enables him to put himself in Will’s shoes to a degree. Will has maintained control of the narrative thus far. He chooses the events he wants to include and Daniel, true to their agreement, writes down the questions Will does not want to answer.

Will has noticed Daniel has written down a lot of questions. He has taken a copious amount of notes. Will’s forts have been closed to Daniel this entire time and Daniel has accepted the arrangement. He has not challenged Will on anything. Not yet.

At this point in the therapy, Daniel’s focus is on obtaining a chronological context. He has needed to know the players in Will’s drama and how they all fit. Will has answered his questions about everyone involved to a point. Will has provided Daniel with sketches, with just enough line and shading to enhance the exposition.

But Will has almost finished with the exposition. Once Will has brought him up to speed, the real therapy will begin and Will is filled with trepidation even though unloading his burden is precisely why he went to Daniel in the first place.

Will sits at the table running his hands over his face. He had entered Daniel’s office with the hope that he alleviate his weariness, lighten his mental load, help him make sense of all that has happened to him and yet, the pendulous stone he carries seems heavier now than ever.

Maybe because Will feels like instead of moving forward, he is going backward.

The fragments of buried memories that have flashed through his mind have not brought him clarity and neither have they brought him closer to any kind of closure. Will’s mind burns with glimpses into his past, of sitting in a chair with lights flashing into his eyes, strains of classical music in his ears, and the touches of warm hands and lips upon his skin while Hannibal whispers to him in the darkness of his office as he slips a needle into his arm.

The implications are plain. Which responses are conditioned and which are completely his own? Is there even a difference anymore? Will thinks there has to be. Operant conditioning is only effective when the patient is unaware. And it is temporary. Remove the rewards or change the associations and the conditioning falls apart. Doesn't it?

These scraps of insanity have further complicated Will's feelings about Hannibal. His feelings are complicated enough already. He is sinking in quicksand.

How deep into the rabbit hole did he fall? *No*, Will corrects himself; *I jumped down it all by myself. Didn't I?*

Will had known about the conditioning. He had accepted it as part of the price of catching Hannibal. What he had not guessed was the breadth and scope of it.

First you have to grieve for what is lost and what has changed.

I've changed. You've changed me.

Will has changed. And the changing had evidently been going on far longer than Will had suspected. Hannibal had not only insinuated himself into Will's conscious waking existence; he had been seducing his subconscious quite literally.

Hannibal had always had a design for Will. Causing strategic blackouts had been part of his design all along. His design had never included framing Will. Hannibal had set Will free.

Shoving Abigail's ear down his throat through a tube had been the means to an end. Will had gotten too close, too soon. That had been Hannibal improvising with tools he already had at his disposal. That had been Hannibal making corrections.

Abigail had failed to assuage Jack's concerns. He had followed his hunch and the evidence had born it out. Hannibal had to make her disappear to protect himself. He had used her disappearance and her ear to set up Will. Then Hannibal had had to invent a way to get his favorite patient out of the mess he had placed him in.

At the time, Will had thought that Hannibal had manipulated his release because he wasn't finished with abetting Will's evolution, with helping Will cultivate his urges for the inspirations they were. And that was part of it, but Hannibal had genuinely regretted putting him in BSHCI in the first place. After talking to Miriam Lass and seeing what she had done to Chilton, he had known Hannibal's manipulations could undermine anyone's training, even the rigorous training of the lauded FBI.

You and I are part of his design. He wanted you to be free. He wanted me to be free too.

Neither of us are really free. He's not done.

Hannibal had not been done with Will. Finding out what Hannibal had done to him had been what had stayed his hand as he had gripped the trigger of the gun pointed at Hannibal's head that afternoon in his kitchen. Hannibal had wisely appealed to the only emotion that could have possibly trumped his anger in that moment.

Hannibal's insatiable curiosity was matched only by Will's own.

However, Hannibal had been done with Miriam. Miriam had been totally under Hannibal's control. His psychiatric expertise had rendered Miriam completely powerless to resist. Miriam's identification of poor Frederick as the Ripper had been masterfully played. That she had shot him was a bonus. Will has yet to figure out at what point Hannibal decided to frame the ill-fated Frederick for his crimes. Framing Chilton had not always been his intention.

Hannibal had not allowed Gideon or anyone else to claim his crown. But, as arrogant as Hannibal was, he had been willing to hand over the throne and allow Chilton to take the credit for all his work.

He could bury the Chesapeake Ripper in Frederick's backyard because by then, he had only needed one person to know the truth. There had been only one person with whom Hannibal had wanted to share his secrets, his accomplishments, his bed…

Miriam had been but a pawn in Hannibal's design. Will had known Hannibal considered him the prize worth waiting for. Hannibal was in love with him. In love with the ideal of him. In love with the idea of being in love.

We couldn't leave without you.

But Will had realized too late that the love had been genuine, and to Hannibal's thinking, selfless and meaningful, even beautiful. And Will had unknowingly used *that* love to lure Hannibal.

Hannibal's rage and pain had been so visceral that night, that Will had welcomed, actually welcomed the blade to his stomach. He had made such a mess of things by that point, that even in his surprise, he had felt deserving. In his efforts to save everyone, including Hannibal, he had left only blood in his wake. The irony.

The pain Will had felt as he clutched Hannibal's shoulder, had not been entirely his own. He had felt Hannibal's wrath, the linoleum blade was still lodged in his gut, but as he had looked into Hannibal's eyes, he had felt the pain, too. Will had endured the pain of both of them, as Hannibal had known he would.

Will had been able to piece it all together, his imagination finally in possession of all the evidence. One teacup, meant for three. He had pieced it together, too late.

The place was made for Abigail in your world. Do you understand? The place was made for all of us together…

Will had shaken his head into Hannibal's shoulder, feeling his hands cradle his head, smooth his hair. Hannibal had not understood that the place he imagined could not exist. But Hannibal had believed. And Will had taken that from him. Will had rejected his restored tea cup and in a tantrum, Hannibal had shattered it completely.

There had been no moment when Will could have explained his own intentions to Hannibal.

As soon as Will had seen Abigail alive, his mind had ceased to function in real time. He had been unprepared for Hannibal's ruthless assault. The pain from the wound Hannibal inflicted had not cut as deeply as the knowledge that Hannibal had hurt him with the same ferocity and tenderness as he had loved him.

Will's head hurts with all the remembering. He wonders if Hannibal implanted some negative reinforcement for that in his subconscious, too. He wouldn't doubt it. Now, with these other memories resurfacing, his feelings about Hannibal have shifted yet again.

Will closes his eyes and thinks it will never stop. He is so tired of thinking about it, all of it. Will is sure it is no accident that the memories have surfaced since meeting Daniel. Will believes that drunken night in Daniel's office triggered his repressed memories in ways that even his conversation with Miriam had not. Miriam had not touched him.

The touching and the kissing with Daniel had evoked the same responses within him as Hannibal had. Only, instead of being in Hannibal's bedroom, where Hannibal had intended the conditioning to kick in, Will had been someplace else, with someone else.

Daniel had perhaps been acting on impulse initially, but even in his inebriated state, Daniel had likely sensed Will's growing arousal, his anticipation, his imagination running wild.

Daniel is fortunate Will did stop. Will would have eagerly torn him apart and fucked his brains out. And then fucked some more…

Will wonders if Daniel had sensed those violent urges and wanted Will anyway. Will thinks there may be a side to Daniel he keeps locked up tight. Will's pathology cannot possibly be a mystery to him. And with all that empathy, he cannot believe he is immune.

Will shakes his head. They will be discussing all of it, every dirty detail soon enough. At least his mind is clear now. Hopelessly and excruciatingly clear.

Daniel is the only doctor Will has ever encountered who has refused to treat him with drugs. Daniel has prescribed nothing for him. He even took Will's diazepam and flushed it down the toilet in his office bathroom.

"I want a clean slate." Daniel had said, "I need to see your brain in action unadulterated and I need to feel your true emotions, not heightened or subdued by opiates."

Will has to concede that he is now as pure as he could possibly be. He has never gone this long without being on something. He thinks his forced abstinence might have something to do with his most recent flashes of memories. His occasional insobriety is another matter. One he would rather not discuss with Daniel.

Will rolls his eyes as he clears off the table, sets the plate and cup in the sink to wash. Daniel probably knows Will imbibes his whiskey only slightly less frequently than he does his coffee.

Will yawns and glances longingly at his bed. He looks at his phone. He should call Lucia or Luciano. He looks again at the bed.

He didn't sleep well last night and while that is nothing new, the nightmares were. There seemed a never ending parade of disturbing images to torment him, taunting him every conscious moment to extrapolate, review, rewind, and interpret. Unlike a crime scene, his dreams were elusive, shifting with every other dream that competed for space in the attic of his mind.

Last night's sequence of dream images had sent him trembling onto the floor on all fours listening to the silent screaming in his head as he had shuddered mute, unable to utter a sound as a slimy winged serpent bird-like thing had erupted from his scar in a blood soaked mass of scales, talons, and feathers slipping from his stomach like some aborted fetus onto the hardwood floor.

Will had stared in silent horror at the writhing thing expelled from his own belly, the gaping wound slick and sticky beneath his fingers as he probed his damaged flesh. To his growing horror the thing had uncurled itself and begun scaling his arm, piercing his flesh with beak and talons as it climbed.

His attempts to dislodge it failed and it clawed its way higher, gripping his shoulders, digging talons into his chest, as it pulled itself across the length of his body. Will had felt it pushing its way back into his stomach, back through the wound. He had woken up screaming, gasping for air still feeling it squirm beneath the scar.

And this was only the nightmare he awakened from at 5:21 this morning. Will had endured an entire night of interrupted slumber, each time waking to the green LED light of his clock and shuddering in a pool of his own sweat.

He knows he should inform Daniel. He thought he had these bad dreams under control and wonders why they have started up again with a vengeance. The frosted ravenstag and the wolf are becoming constant nocturnal companions and Will fears he will start seeing them when he is awake, like the antlers he watched grow out of Daniel's couch.

Will decides he will mention his concerns. Perhaps his encephalitis has returned. Perhaps he should just keep this to himself for now.

He locates the Paolini's number in his contacts. He hits send and waits for one of them to pick up. It's Luciano.

"Ciao?" Luciano says sounding like he just woke up. "Mr. Graham?"

"Ciao, yourself. We need to talk. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure. What's on your mind? Haven't heard from you in while."

"I've been seeing to my health."

"You ok now?" Luciano says. Will imagines him picking at his fingernails with the blade he keeps in his right coat pocket. Or, he's slicing up a piece of fruit with it. One thing Will has never seen Luciano do is clean it.

"Yeah. Much better. How do you think our search is going?"

"To be honest, the well is pretty dry, Signore."

"I think so too. I've been considering a different approach."

"So has Lucia. She thinks the Doctore likes his art, yes?"

"Yes, he does." Will says, glancing in the mirror that hangs over his dresser.

"So, Lucia figures he will be buying you know, new stuff, for his place here. To replace what he left behind in the states."

"That makes sense although he likely already had a place and plenty of stuff in storage."

Will can hear Lucia's voice. He waits while the two of them confer between smacks and giggles.

"Even so, he still likes going to art houses. It's his thing, right?" Luciano says.

"Very much his thing. What kinds of places has Lucia been targeting?"

Luciano lists the auction houses and galleries around Florence.

"And the illegal ones?" Will asks.

"Ah…well Lucia knows those as well. And there are always fancy invitation only receptions and concerts he likes to attend. Lucia can crash those, too."

"All the things he did in Baltimore have been suspended, Luciano. He went out in public before he was on the most wanted list. He won't want to draw attention to himself now."

"But it is his nature, no?"

"His survival instinct is stronger, don't you think?"

Will can almost hear Luciano shrug, can almost see him purse his lips in thought.

"Lucia thinks he has to come out sometime. It's been a year. Maybe he thinks it's safe."

"Maybe." Will says, "Or he might engage a third party to make purchases for him. I would."

"Lucia thinks he might be looking to sell some of his art stuff if he needs money."

Will thinks that highly unlikely. For all he knows, Hannibal has more money than Verger. Will decides not to keep shooting down Luciano's ideas. There's only so much his Italian pride can take.

"We don't know much about Dr. Lecter before he came to Baltimore. I think the key to finding him is to learn about his past."

"Oh, to find out where he's going; find out where he's been." Luciano says, pleased with himself.

"Something like that. What do you know about Lithuania?"

"Former Soviet Bloc country. Very difficult to get information there. Lot's of official records lost or destroyed. That where he's from?"

Will hears him slurping, imagines the sweet flesh of a peach disappear in Luciano's vacuous mouth, his blade poised to take another juicy slice.

"You and Lucia could take a trip there. Investigate. See where it leads."

"Hmmmm. I don't know. Very expensive. Need passports, accommodations, and lots and lots of discretion."

"Mr. Verger has very deep pockets, doesn't he?"

"Not as deep as his vengeance."

Will can imagine the dangerous smile reflected in Luciano’s blade that has likely not left his hand the entire conversation.

“Ok. I’ll make the arrangements with Mr. Verger on your recommendation. You prepare a dossier for me and my sister, eh?”

“I’ll be in touch.” Will says.

He looks again at the bed. He looks outside. The sun is out, there is a breeze, and the parkway is not far. He knows if he lies down, he will either think or dream. At least if he goes outside, he will only think. He slips on his sneakers and leaves his computer, his phone, and his laundry inside.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

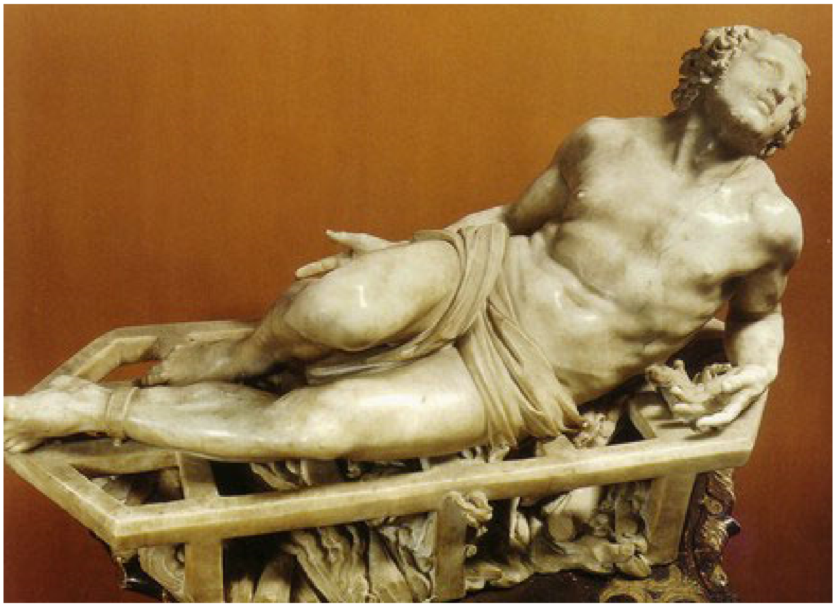
Hannibal returns to his memory palace. This time, it is the master bedroom he visits.

"You said you fed the dogs, repaired the window?" A nod from Will. "You are welcome to stay."
Will had found his keys by then and had stood with one hand on the doorknob. He had inclined his head to look again at his bandage.
"An invitation?" Will had asked, head still bent.
"Always. Your choice, Will."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14



Saint Lawrence Martyred on a Gridiron

Bernini

Contini Bonacossi Collection, Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Hannibal returns to his memory palace. This time, it is the master bedroom he visits.

Hannibal has finished his lecture. It is dusk outside. Hannibal can see the Ponte Vecchio and the Arno through the huge windows as he walks with his notebook in hand. The Museum is closed for the day but Hannibal has the clearance and the key card that afford him a leisurely departure.

He has walked the entire Corridor many times the past year. After delivering his lecture at Palazzo Pitti, the private home of the Medici, he takes his time returning to the Uffizi Gallery through the wandering passages of the Vasari Corridor, a restricted part of the Uffizi, and closed to tourists.

Sexual symbolism in the art of the High Renaissance had been the topic of his lecture and he had not spared his small audience the fascinating minutia embedded in the collected works of the Medici. Hannibal shakes his head slightly as he walks. Adults should not be so uncomfortable discussing a topic as universal as sex. Although, given his audience today, perhaps not so universal.

Restricting access had not guaranteed the safety of the collection however, and Hannibal is reminded of man's cruelty as he rounds the next corner. People went to great lengths to deny their sexual desires, but spent a lot of time engaged in pointless violence. Hannibal found politically charged violence the most reprehensible of all.

The Italian Mafia had blown up a section of the Corridor in 1993, along with a strip of houses, destroying many irreplaceable pieces and damaging several others. The remnants had been lovingly restored as much as possible and rehung to commemorate the attack. Hannibal thinks five people died, but he's not certain. The loss of art was a travesty.

The Vasari Corridor was designed and built by Giorgio Vasari, artist and architect of the Renaissance, but known for his *Lives of the Painters* a guide to the celebrated artists of his time, a treatise akin to Seutonius' *The Twelve Caesars* though less scandalous. As Hannibal walks through the corridor he imagines it without the portraits, paintings, and sculptures and tries to see it as it had been all those centuries ago when the Medici and ruling class of Florence used it to ensure safe and unobstructed passage through the city.

Its raised and winding passageways extend from the Palazzo Pitti to the Palazzo Vecchio in Piazza della Signoria, the seat of power where the Medici had served their beloved Florence and where the replica of Michelangelo's *David* sits outside so the original is not exposed to the corrosive rain and pigeon excrement. The Corridor joins with the Uffizi along the way.

The Corridor contains work from artists of the past five centuries, and Hannibal can name nearly all of them. In time, he will learn the rest.

He enjoys his position with the Uffizi and takes pride in delivering his lectures to the small groups of professors and special guests granted special dispensation to walk the hallowed Corridor with him. He is in his element as he takes them through a carefully plotted presentation seated in a darkened room of Palazzo Vecchio, their heads nodding at the power point he made to enhance his lecture. He has been gratified by the requests for copies of his expertly researched and annotated notes.

But his pride and enjoyment have not been enough to fill the hole in his chest. As Hannibal's dark eyes are treated to the twisting figures of the saints in rapturous agony that line the walls, he is reminded of the topic of his lecture and his thoughts turn invariably to thoughts of Will.

He pauses, not for the first time, before the work of an unknown artist, believed to be a student of Bernini since the Bernini sculpture it copies is displayed in the Uffizi's Contini Bonacossi Collection, also closed to the public. It is a most sensuous and sensual handling of paint and brush.

The painting recalls the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence who met a grisly end tied to a gridiron. The pose of the finely chiseled and polished marble body is intended to depict grace in the face of death. The saint's legs writhe along the gridiron as his muscular body twists against the bonds that bind his tightly bound extremities in place. He leans on one elbow, so he can angle his head heavenward in order to witness the face of God in his moment of supreme surrender.

Hannibal marvels at the brushstrokes that create the illusion of smooth living flesh upon the flat canvas even after all this time. The illusion would be lost should Hannibal reach out his hand and touch the surface and so, he does not. He stares at the serene visage upon the face of the saint, the smooth skin, the wisps of stubble along his chin, and the mane of tousled brown curls that crown his head.

His mind travels to his memory palace where Will had found himself in a similar pose absent the bonds gathered at wrists and ankles but tied to Hannibal's bed nonetheless.

The starless snowy night that Hannibal had harnessed the savage passion of Randall Tier and sent him to indulge his primal urges on the young FBI profiler who had questioned him only days before had proven the visceral awakening for Will that Hannibal had hoped for. Tier had gazed at the silent and solitary little house in Wolf Trap from his concealed vantage point in the woods, panting with anticipation as his breath had caught in the night air and billowed into the darkness.

Tier had provided a necessary catalyst. It had not been Tier's savage passions Hannibal had wanted to ignite.

While Tier had been beautiful in his own way, his beauty had remained the simple and primal beauty it had always been. Tier had merely refined its expression. The expression was stunning in its simplicity and terrible in its awesome execution, and in that, Tier's evolution had reached its pinnacle. His becoming could now give rise to Will's becoming. Hannibal had drunk deeply from Will's cup of surrender to his becoming that night.

His had been a truly beautiful and complex becoming; as finely crafted as the cherished vintages in Hannibal's wine cellar and infinitely more delicious. The events play out in Hannibal's mind accompanied by all the raw emotion recorded in the recesses of Hannibal's vast and detailed palace.

Hannibal had wanted to *see* Will, had wanted his feelings to be genuine. With his empathy, Will could imagine a Hannibal in his mind; could mimic Hannibal; could anticipate. He had been doing that all evening as he had prepared his monument to Tier and that had been expected. That Will could do that was why he was here.

The monument had only been a part of the experience he had shared with Will. Savagery distilled and quieted with purposeful creation had given way to other unsated unrealized urges on the edge of Will's consciousness. Dismantling the restraints Will had placed on those urges had been foremost on Hannibal's mind as Will had followed him up from the depths of his basement through the kitchen and up the stairs to his master bedroom and bath, to wash away the blood of his baptism.

But for this, Hannibal had wanted Will, not Will's idea of what Hannibal wanted. He's still not sure what he got that long lost weekend at his home in Baltimore.

Possess.

Consume.

Consummation.

Violence and intimacy, a circle.

Anticipation of this moment had been building for a long time. His advance preparations had nurtured the urges Will had kept buried for so long, including those of the sexual variety. Hannibal had viewed the growing relationship between them as a symphony in the making. Establishing a foundation had taken time, but the prelude was over.

The prelude had been composed by Hannibal. The first movement had been Will's. Will had written the coda to that movement by killing Tier with his bare hands. Hannibal had been ready for a duet, but he had not been sure about Will. Wasn't that always the case?

It had been an honest moment for Will. The conditioning had been designed to ease Will's acceptance, not force it. Hannibal had known how difficult intimacy was for Will. Not that he wasn't capable of sexual intimacy, but he was wary of it, of the loss of control, of self, it represented.

No matter how kissable Alana Bloom had been, Will had only acted on his attraction to her out of desperation for a life line in a moment of distress. Hannibal's conditioning had been a gift to Will. A gift Will had shared, rather surprisingly with Margot Verger. But that had been later. This night, Hannibal had been the recipient of Will's gifts.

No one had ever looked at Hannibal, or into Hannibal, as Will had.

Hannibal had decided after gazing at Will across the little table in his motel room in Minnesota where they had shared their first meal together, that those penetrating blue eyes had the potential to see what others refused to see. That Will's empathy gave him the power to understand and appreciate Hannibal in ways no one else had done and in ways he could share if Will permitted himself to accept what Hannibal had seen in him.

What do you see?

The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.

It was after Will had returned, unharmed from his altercation with Tobias Budge, that Hannibal had realized he loved him.

I feel like I've dragged you into my world.

I got here on my own. But I appreciate the company.

But it was only after he had caused Will's incarceration at BSHCI that Hannibal had acknowledged he wanted him. Will's physical absence had affected Hannibal so profoundly, that getting him back was all Hannibal could do.

I want you to believe in the best of me, just as I believe in the best of you… I don't want you to be here.

I don't want me to be here either.

No one has moved Hannibal like Will. Will makes him feel…alive.

Earlier, Will had stared at the colorless and freshly cleaned body of Randall Tier as it lay on the rinse table in the basement and had been well aware he might have been the one lying there, albeit in pieces. His quiet soulful eyes had mourned over Tier's corpse acknowledging the scenario where he might have been the one providing the meat for yet another delectable feast. He had brushed his bristly chin over Hannibal's hand resting warm and heavy on his shoulder and he had known Hannibal had not wanted Tier beside him.

Will had taken a quick inventory of his workspace, touching everything with eyes and slender fingers as Hannibal had indulged his curiosity over the hum of Bach's second Brandenburg Concerto. He had sliced off Tier's arms and legs before the beginning of the second movement.

In the beginning, Will had not known how Hannibal had indulged him in so many ways, had found him too fascinating and beautiful to reprimand as he had made himself at home in Hannibal's office.

He was always leaving his coat lying about, walking around the upper level his boots caked with mud.

He had sat at Hannibal's desk, brushing aside Hannibal's appointment book, his pens, clock, and whatever else had been sitting there to make room for his own notebook as he had sat hunched over Hannibal's solid teak antique desk writing lecture notes or grading papers before driving home after a session.

He had leaned on that perfectly polished desk, had actually dispensed with the leather chair altogether and had sat on his desk, all without realizing Hannibal had never allowed anyone to do so without ending up on his dinner table.

Later, after Will had become more familiar with Hannibal's habits and wishes, he had continued to assault Hannibal's desk, but only after treating Hannibal to raised brows, wide blue eyes, and a knowing tease of a smile.

Hannibal had rearranged the items on his desk to accommodate Will with his buttons and belt buckles on the nights he had appointments. He had kept a coaster on the desk just for him.

The indulgence Hannibal had granted to Will in his office paled next to the indulgence Will received at his house. Will had walked a fine line when it came to pushing Hannibal's patience in his own home and for that reason Hannibal had concluded that Will enjoyed living dangerously.

Yes, Will had known the place he held in Hannibal's eyes and his heart. He had won it, and Hannibal had let him claim it for his own.

The dismemberment of Tier had been performed with cold efficiency. Will had severed limbs where Hannibal had indicated once Will had explained the form his debt would take. Will had not recoiled from the task of removing organs nor had he displayed any trepidation about dismantling Tier's mandible from the temporal bones of the upper jaw.

Will was possessed of a surgeon's hands, sure and nimble hands - like his own. He had set those hands to the task of affixing the saber toothed tiger's upper jaw to the gutted remains of Tier's head with the same concentrated determination as he would a motor. He had likely found the tasks remarkably similar by the end of it.

His monument to Tier had mirrored Hannibal's penchant for dispensing judgment but with Tier Will had endowed his gruesome tableau with his own grotesque homage to Tier's pathology and deepest desires. Will's creation demonstrated an intimate identification with Tier's brand of violence; Tier's brutality realized in a sculpture fashioned from his own flesh and bones.

Will had endowed his work with his own unique sensitivity and an attention to detail that Hannibal could only admire. Tier was a masterpiece.

Will had stood in the dim hall of the museum, flexing his bandaged hand, his mind churning restlessly behind eyes that swept over his creation, seeing shadows only he could see. After disposing of the evidence, Hannibal had driven them back to his house.

Will had helped Hannibal clean his workspace in the basement. He had paused to stretch his back, crack his neck, but had not complained. Hannibal's back and limbs were more accustomed to the labor, but even he had felt the pangs of tired muscles. Will had not tarried when Hannibal had finally gestured to the stairs after giving the room a cursory once over.

Will's car had been parked around back in his usual place next to the kitchen entrance. He had already disinfected and cleaned his vehicle and had stood in Hannibal's kitchen, fishing around in his pockets for his car keys.

"Will, it makes no sense to drive to Wolf Trap when a phone call from Jack is imminent. Come upstairs and shower – you need to relax."

Will had continued to feel around for his keys.

"You said you fed the dogs, repaired the window?" A nod from Will. "You are welcome to stay."

Will had found his keys by then and had stood with one hand on the doorknob. He had inclined his head to look again at his bandage.

"An invitation?" Will had asked, head still bent.

"Always. Your choice, Will."

Hannibal knows now how conflicted Will had been that night. Playing secret agent for Jack while subjecting himself to a complete immersion into the very place within himself he had always feared.

But Jack had already demonstrated his disregard for Will's personal safety and mental well-being, and knowing Will, he had likely counted on Jack behaving that way. Will had had his own agenda all along and Jack had had no idea what he had sanctioned. Will had engaged in behavior that Jack would never have approved of, let alone understood.

While Will had been deceiving Hannibal; he had been deceiving himself. Until…

Didn't I?

Will could not have fabricated his emotions nor could he have simulated his physical responses that weekend, no matter how powerfully he employed his gift. His pure empathy had at last, for a time, provided him an accurate reflection of himself.

Hannibal had seen Will naked many times. Hannibal had undressed and dressed him, all while he had been passed out or in some stage of altered consciousness. Those had not been the occasions to appreciate Will's physical assets. To take advantage of Will in that state would have been unforgivably rude. Will's black outs had been of finite duration and Hannibal had his therapy to focus on.

To see Will upright and moving around in complete command of his faculties naked was quite a different thing. A connoisseur of beauty, Hannibal had appreciated the proportion and symmetry of Will's physique. He was quite simply the Greek ideal. Will was exactly what Hannibal would have placed perfect and naked in Eden if he were God.

As they had showered, Hannibal had found himself averting his gaze, subverting his curiosity and, if Hannibal were to be honest, his possessiveness of Will's unadulterated beauty. Hannibal had tempered his elation at being able to touch him and Will allowing Hannibal to touch him. Sheer delight at the sensation of Will's lathered flesh beneath his fingertips had threated to claim Hannibal's control and rip it from him.

A meal Hannibal could devour once, but this…possessing Will like this could be enjoyed time and time again. Hannibal had no doubt that Will had understood the meaning of offering himself like this.

His look of mild surprise when Hannibal had begun to pull off his own clothes as the steam from the shower filled his extravagant bath had disappeared quickly. Too quickly for Hannibal. He had enjoyed the way Will's breath had caught in his throat and the way he had swallowed it down eyes riveted to Hannibal's every movement.

As Hannibal had washed Will, cleansed his hair, his face, his body of the remnants of Tier's dismemberment and restoration, the meaningful glances exchanged between them had confirmed for Hannibal that Will had understood Hannibal's hunger for him and was prepared to acquiesce.

The tension had hung thickly in the steam; the very air they had breathed had been saturated with it.

Hannibal had exercised restraint in the shower. Above all else, Hannibal had wanted to put Will at ease, to summon those associations already so receptive to Hannibal's voice and touch.

Will was not going to run out the door, he had wanted to be here, but this was an important step for Will to take. Hannibal had been preparing Will for this. Even so, Hannibal had never been able to fully understand how Will's mind worked, and no matter how confident Hannibal had been of his therapy, he had only been able to guess how effective his efforts would prove on Will.

Hannibal clenches his jaw in the painful knowledge that Will had viewed his therapy as a cancer that had to be excised, not as a cure. Did he still?

Hannibal's eyes twitch with the thought that Will might very well be self-medicating somewhere, drowning in alcohol and bitterness, numbing his mind enough so he could drift into the fitful state he associates with something that approaches actual slumber. Will's capacity for self-abuse was at least as deep as his empathy. When Will turned his empathic lens upon himself he often found only the worst. Hannibal had tried to change that perception.

And Will, the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else.

Hannibal remembers he had finished wrapping the fresh bandage around Will's hand after their shower. Will had watched Hannibal redress his wound in silence, and although he was present, he had remained as quiet and pliable as he had been in the shower. He had acknowledged Hannibal; a nod here and eye contact there, reassuring Hannibal that he had not departed completely and yet he had not been entirely *there*.

Will's behavior would have seemed dissociative had Hannibal not known better. But Hannibal had become accustomed to Will's mannerisms and had dismissed any clinical concern. Neither had he taken Will's aloofness personally. Will's mind allowed him to be many places at once, a singular feat Hannibal had recognized only within himself, until Will.

Part of Will had still been with Tier.

Hannibal had handled Will with care all evening, had spoken in measured tones; had kept the touching gentle, respectful. Hannibal's patience with Will was boundless. Will had always held his own around Hannibal, and Hannibal had always been attentive to the subtle and not so subtle cues from Will when it came to defining his personal space. At least when Will had been conscious.

Will had been in this bedroom before, and the bathroom, but he had not recovered those memories despite Chilton's efforts, perhaps because of them. Will had lost time in this very bed, had slept in clothes procured by Hannibal, clothes that had been infused with the scent of his sachet filled drawers and closets. Will had wandered down Hannibal's halls, sleepwalking, until Hannibal had guided him gently to his Bentley and driven him back to Wolf Trap and had tucked him into his own bed.

Did you lose time again, Will?

Yes…I can't believe this keeps happening to me…

Patience was most definitely a virtue, especially where his dear Will was concerned. The rewards had been incalculable. Hannibal had been guiding Will toward this stage of his evolution for months as surely as he had guided him so many times to his car.

Hannibal had been pleased with Will all evening. Will had obeyed his instructions; neither objecting to, nor questioning anything asked of him…so far.

Hannibal had understood that even while showering that Will had continued to process the multitude of emotions that threatened to tear his mind apart. He was not only analyzing his own responses, but the feelings, intentions, and desires of Randall and of Hannibal as well. The blank expression on Will's face was misleading. It would be a mistake to think that his mind was vacant. Far from it.

Hannibal had placed the surgical tape back into his med kit and had looked down at his work, his fingers taking Will's hand in his. He had stroked Will's slender fingers with his thumb coaxing warmth back into Will's cool dry skin.

"This is the perfect symbol of your desire for violence and intimacy."

He had drawn his thumb across the clean white strips of cotton. He imagines again how that fight to the death with Randall must have played out. How Will's fingers must have curled in anticipation of colliding with flesh, skin, and bone. How he must have stood staring at his stained and scraped knuckles in awe of what he had done. Had he smiled with satisfaction afterward? Hannibal believes he did.

Will's hand had stirred a little at Hannibal's touch, his eyes wide as he had watched Hannibal sniff at the fresh bandage. Hannibal had noted the smell of the antiseptic mingled with the soap smelled faintly like Will's old aftershave. The new Will, the one who had resumed his therapy, had since traded up and Hannibal had enthusiastically approved of that change.

Hannibal had sensed the tension coiled within Will as he had sat on the edge of the bed, still, eyes tracking Hannibal as he had risen to stand beside him. Will had lifted his eyes slowly, taking measure of Hannibal's impressive physique. Hannibal had bathed in the glow of Will's attentions, his senses heighted to a most delightful degree.

"Is it?" Will had said finally, that peculiar flicker of amusement on his lips. "I would think dressing wounds in the nude was pretty intimate."

Hannibal's lips had twitched as he quelled another of the smiles Will could so easily bring to the surface.

"Where violence is the expression of intimacy, intimacy is the reward for the violence. A circle."

He had leaned closer savoring the smell of his soap on Will's perfect pale skin and his shampoo lingering in the dark damp curls framing his face.

"Are you proposing more violence or more intimacy?"

Will had looked up at him as Hannibal's hand had cupped his jaw, thumb idly caressing the stubble on his chin. It was a familiar touch that invited the familiar response. Will had leaned into his hand as Hannibal had answered, eyes distractingly beautiful as he had held Hannibal's gaze.

"I think where you and I are concerned, the two are hopelessly entwined." Hannibal had said.

Will's eyes had softened in agreement even if his mouth had not. Hannibal had been unprepared for what happened next.

Will had abruptly pushed off from the bed and had twisted his body shoving a surprised Hannibal sideways and forward so that Hannibal had been forced to dive for the bed rather than lose his footing. A second later, Hannibal had found himself lying on his back and Will had him pinned, elbow and forearm across his throat. He had pressed against Hannibal's Adam's apple in a show of force, but had allowed enough leverage so Hannibal had been able to swallow slowly.

That had been Will's first mistake.

Will's eyes had flickered with the ripple of movement in Hannibal's throat beneath his arm. Hannibal had fancied that Will had not even been aware of the way he had rolled his arm slightly over the growth of evening whiskers allowing the stubble to tease the soft skin of his arm. Will had moved in close so that their noses were almost touching.

"I agree" Will had said, his breath warm and sweet.

Hannibal had wondered in that moment if Will had enjoyed the feel of their bodies finally touching, the sensation of skin on skin as much as he. He had felt the weight of Will as Will had slid around on top of him adjusting his position. He had actually believed he could hold Hannibal there beneath him. Hannibal had reveled in the sensuousness, the carnality of Will's stomach, hips, and cock pressing, pulsing with the flush of blood and oxygen coursing through him. Will's eyes had held the barest hint of blue glimmering beneath black lashes.

"Are you thinking about killing me, Will?"

Hannibal had swallowed again, had clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and had waited with parted lips for the subtle movements to register in Will's unblinking eyes.

"Right now? No…"

Will had moistened his lips, and Hannibal had felt the grip of Will's legs around his hips tighten slightly.

Will had leaned in and closed the sliver of space between them; his lips had grazed Hannibal's. Opportunity had certainly beckoned during those times Will had been drugged in his office, asleep in his bed, or suffering a mild seizure and Hannibal had touched Will's lips with his fingers many times, had tested Will's sucking reflex, had touched his lips to Will's as Will had just done, but he had never actually kissed him.

Hannibal had found himself staring at a very awake and self-possessed Will poised right above his mouth. Will had paused, hovering to see what Hannibal would do.

Hannibal had lifted his head off the mattress to press into the tentative kiss Will had offered. The taste of that mouth had sent a cascade of pleasure through every nerve. As Will had pressed back, his lips crushing into Hannibal's own, his weight on Hannibal's throat shifted.

That had been Will's second mistake.

Hannibal had exploited Will's momentary lapse in his hold and had bolted up dislodging Will who had fumbled to regain his position. It was a futile but valiant attempt on Will's part. Unused to the slippery satin, Will had lost his grip on the sheets and his legs had flailed in an effort to find balance on the tip of the mattress.

Hannibal had quickly flipped Will onto his back, had shoved him upward along the mattress, holding his arms over his head locking him in a hold. Will had looked down at his lower half with some alarm. He had found his knees bent and calves dangling over the side of the bed. He had kicked his feet, unable to touch the floor. That was Hannibal's design.

Hannibal had measured the distance from bed to floor a long time ago. Calculating in Will's height had been easy enough for Hannibal to determine the precise placement of the mattress and of the position Will's body should be on the mattress to avoid traction. Hannibal knew the value of advance preparation.

Hannibal had positioned himself over Will, knees between Will's legs, able to spread them if he chose.

Will had looked up at him, grimaced; his jaw twitching from side to side in that way that was uniquely his. He had been annoyed at Hannibal, but more likely with himself. Hannibal had stared down at him enjoying the moment. He had enjoyed just being able to look at him this way.

Hannibal had seen nearly every emotion play across Will's beautiful face up to that night. All but one. And Hannibal had desired to see that emotion most of all.

But at this moment, Hannibal had been content to gaze at Will trapped beneath him. His arms had been bent over his head, his wrists pinned to the mattress, chest rising and falling with each breath; a perfect pose of surrender that Hannibal had conjured up many times before. Hannibal had thought Will had been made to look like this.

The longing to see Will's face contorted in pleasure had been palpable. Hannibal had felt the excess of saliva under his tongue, the minute increase of sensitivity throughout his body. The mere thought had sent tremors up and down Hannibal's spine, tiny needles prickling from scalp to balls. And he had not doubted that Will had been perceptive enough to detect his involuntary responses.

What Will had needed, had been in need of for a long time, was to lose control and give himself over to his urges, violent and otherwise. In a safe environment, of course. There was no place more secure than Hannibal's bed, and no one more understanding or willing to assist than Hannibal.

Hannibal had swallowed the silence that hung between them, had allowed Will time to decide if he truly wanted to take the intimacy further. Whatever happened had to be a voluntary act on Will's part. Whether out of curiosity or unbridled lust, Hannibal had not cared. He had hoped for some combination of the two. Will did not love him.

That Will had wanted to know him, see him, had been enough. On some level, Will must have known that in engaging Hannibal, he would also know himself.

Hannibal had leaned forward, "You once said the light from friendship won't reach us for a million years."

"And you said the friendship we had is over."

"Yet here we are."

"Yes. Here we are."

"Still grieving for what has been lost?"

"Still trying to posit my intentions?"

"You are always unpredictable, Will."

Hannibal had slid his hips over Will's, his cock lightly skimming the skin of Will's, now warm and erect. He had enjoyed the slight shudder from Will and the widening of his pupils.

"I could not have predicted this." He had pressed harder.

A huff and a snicker had escaped from Will. "Please. Orchestrated is more like it."

"I…hoped." Hannibal could have looked into those eyes all night.

"Oh, you…hoped? You leave nothing to chance."

"Do I? We are here, in this moment only because you wish it. I presented you with choices. I know what I want. Do you?"

Hannibal had allowed him to truly consider his question. He had waited as Will had wrapped his mind around the consequences of his answer. The lamp had cast a soft glow about the room and Will's face had appeared younger. The tired creases had disappeared from his eyes and the pucker of flesh that appeared when Will furrowed his brow had seemed less pronounced.

Will had tensed his arms, testing Hannibal's hold on him. He had arched his back so that his body pressed flush against Hannibal's. Hannibal had arched too, high enough so that Will's body could no longer touch him. Will had sighed, a sweet little sound, and had raised his brows, settled himself back into the mattress.

"I will not take your silence for an answer, Will, nor will I infer one from your behavior."

Will had let loose a long sigh then. "Or what? Veiled threats...Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal had actually blinked. So infuriating, his Will. In answer to his inquiry, Hannibal had eased Will's legs wider, and wider still, until Will's lips had pressed together in a thin determined line.

"There is nothing veiled here, Will. You fantasize about killing me. I propose another kind of intimacy and...ecstasy."

Will had laughed and turned his head aside. "You are suggesting the idea of strangling you with my bare hands is sexually arousing? That's rather…pedestrian."

"As are your attempts to avoid my questions."

Hannibal had leaned in close to inhale Will's hair, lowering his entire body on top of Will as he had breathed in the heady aroma of sandalwood and the musky sweetness that Hannibal had come to recognize as Will's own scent.

"Violent intimacy. Intimate violence." Will had muttered. His face had been so close Hannibal had felt his eyelashes fluttering against his nose.

"My invitation still stands. Accepted or no?"

"Yes." He had whispered. Hannibal had pressed more tightly, grinding his hips against Will in a slow rhythmic motion that caused Will to suck in a breath.

"Hmmmmm?"

"Yes." Will had said again, "Accepted."

Hannibal had kissed him then, deeply and forcefully, not at all the way he had kissed Alana in this very bed. Hannibal had known instinctively that Will did not want romantic nuzzling from him. Will had let his demon out to play and his demon demanded the same intensity in sex as it had in killing. Blood or semen. Will's demon would devour either one with abandon.

As Hannibal had released his grip on Will's arms, Will had cast aside his quiet and composed demeanor in favor of his demon. Hannibal had been assaulted with Will's lips, teeth, and hands all over him. It had been like someone else had joined Hannibal in the bed. And Hannibal had welcomed this other side of Will, had encouraged it, and had loved him for it.

When Hannibal had had enough of ravaging Will's mouth, had felt the urgent kneading of Will's cock against his own, he had pulled away. Will had wet his lips, stared up at him with half lidded eyes.

Hannibal had straddled him, stroked his cheek, and brushed his unruly hair away from his face. Will had propped himself up on his elbows and leveled his unflinching gaze at Hannibal. A most challenging glint from deep blue eyes had peered from beneath thick lashes.

Hannibal had taken Will's face in his hands again, unable to help himself, and spread Will's lips with his tongue. Will had grabbed Hannibal by the shoulders and had sucked his tongue into his mouth. Tongues had glided along teeth and heat had coursed through veins like blood.

He had shuddered in surprise upon feeling the sharp scrape of Will's teeth along his tongue and then had winced in pleasure as Will's teeth had bit down releasing the iron tang of blood. Hannibal's heart had thudded in his chest and he had clenched Will tighter, had felt his rib cage swell as Will gasped for more air, more of this…

Hannibal had bitten him back. Will had arched beneath him, his hands at once in Hannibal's hair, grabbing and pulling, mouths locked together in spit and blood. The groping and twisting had been unrestrained after that.

They had rolled over the bed, bodies entwined in a scramble for dominance like two wolves in heat. Hannibal had found that biting into Will's collarbone and the tender flesh above it sent Will's arms around his neck so tightly Hannibal could barely breathe. He had made a point to graze on him clear up to his neck knowing that pale flesh would bloom with bruises later. In a moment of clarity, Will had shoved Hannibal backward shaking his head at Hannibal to stop.

Hannibal had laughed and shoved him back. Hannibal would leave bruises where he pleased and Will would get used to it. Hannibal had already endured the same from Will. Will's pristine lower half had beckoned to Hannibal and Hannibal had indulged his appetite.

He had crouched over Will bending low to trace his lips over Will's stomach. He had felt the pulse of warm blood and the churn of organs as Will had panted and gasped - so much movement beneath the soft skin and muscle. Hannibal had splayed his fingers across Will's navel and down, pressing gently as Will's hips jerked in response to his touch.

Will had not resisted his teeth.

Instead, Will's fingers had found their way into his hair and Hannibal had groaned in pleasure with every tug. Hannibal had licked lower, past Will's navel, lost in the sensation of silky skin and the taste of salty sweat.

The soft moan that had escaped Will's lips as Hannibal had taken his cock in his mouth had been rapturous. Will had needed no coaxing. He thrust his cock into Hannibal's mouth without hesitation.

How quickly Will had trusted. How completely he had forgotten the biting of a moment ago.

Will had inhaled sharply at the tease of Hannibal's teeth across the slit and had bucked his hips off the bed as Hannibal had scored his teeth the length of him, savoring every twitch, every pulse beneath his tongue as Will's cock slid back and forth through his mouth.

It had been Will who groaned the loudest; his words lost in an incoherent refrain as Hannibal had sucked his cock driving Will mad.

“Nuh…oh, God. Ha…Han…Fuck…OH GOD…Han..ni…bal.”

Will had uttered His name and Hannibal’s in the same breath and Hannibal could not have been more pleased.

When Hannibal had been satisfied he could tease Will no longer, he had released Will’s cock from between his lips.

Will had looked up at him from the mattress, lips drawn in a sinfully inviting smile. He had scooted backward to face Hannibal sitting up on his elbows, hair in tangles about his head. Hannibal had thought that Will should not be allowed to look like that. But he had looked like that.

Hannibal had wanted to impale Will and possess him entirely. But, Hannibal had lavished his attentions on Will because the night had been intended as Will’s introduction to yet another pleasure they could share. Splitting him apart would have been too much, too soon. Patience.

Still, Hannibal had wanted to share this most intimate of encounters with Will as much as he could. He had smiled back at Will from across the rumpled mattress. Hannibal had already written the coda for their first *pas de deux* in his mind.

Will had tensed, sensing Hannibal was about to spring on him.

Will had been correct about that.

Will had not known Hannibal could move so fast.

The sensation of both their cocks in Hannibal’s hands had been nearly too much for Will to bear. He had trembled against Hannibal’s chest, clutching his shoulders for balance, but most importantly for Hannibal – he had been able to see Will’s face.

Hannibal had had no intention of missing the look of Will’s face in complete bliss. Will had not disappointed him. Like a saint experiencing the grace of God, Will had thrown his head back and had groaned until Hannibal had wrung the last quiver and drop from him.

Hannibal had been quite vocal himself, but he had doubted Will had even noticed. Will had collapsed onto his shoulder and Hannibal had held his head in his hands, reveling in the touch of Will’s arms around his neck.

Eventually they had both succumbed to gravity and exhaustion. Will had unwrapped himself from Hannibal’s embrace and had flopped onto the mattress. Hannibal had joined him, gathering up the sheet and blankets from the floor to cover them as their heat had dissipated and the sweat had dried upon their skin.

It is this moment that Will’s pose upon the satin echoes the pose of the martyred saint painted lovingly upon the canvas that hangs before Hannibal now. The same look of wonder and acceptance had graced his features as he had twisted his body to make room next to him, for Hannibal.

Will had reclined onto his back, pulling up the sheet and blankets Hannibal had draped over them.

Hannibal had stretched out beside him, had caressed his flushed cheeks and twisted his fingers through the damp curls splayed out upon the pillow framing his head like a dirty halo. Will had turned his head to face Hannibal. There had been a look in his eyes that Hannibal had not seen before and paired with the enigmatic smile upon his lips, Hannibal had been perplexed.

He puzzles over it still.

“I am…quite pleased.” Hannibal had said his fingers still curled around damp locks of hair.

“Of course you are.” Will had answered.

“Go to sleep, Will.”

“And breathe deep the gathering gloom…” Will had said his eyes already closed.

Hannibal blinks to see the Corridor no longer hosts shadows - the artificial lights have come one. The sky outside is dark, no longer twilight. He clears his throat and lifts his head. He glances at his watch and decides he has retreated enough for one day.

Will had breathed deeply the gathering gloom; they both had. The storm had indeed been on the event horizon of chaos, but it had been their chaos. Hannibal misses it, deeply.

Chapter End Notes

References:
Saint Lawrence Martyred on a Gridiron Bernini
"and breathe deep the gathering gloom"
Nights in White Satin The Moody Blues

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Will's therapy sessions with Daniel intensify for Will and Daniel gives him some homework.

Daniel is sure that Will could not have had time during those weeks leading up to the bloodbath in Lecter's kitchen, to analyze much of anything. He had been operating on instinct and had spent most of his time with Lecter, unable to step outside the condensed and highly concentrated universe the two of them had created for themselves. It is only now that Will has been afforded the opportunity to parse and examine events in any meaningful way. One thing Will cannot do is be objective.

Chapter 15

Will's therapy with Daniel intensifies and involves some homework.

"Will!"

Will hears Daniel's voice filter through the thud of his heartbeat which is disturbingly loud, echoing in his ears. Despite the pain that envelops him, he feels faint, almost weightless like he is fading…

"Will, Stop!" Daniel's voice is more insistent now, closer. He feels a hand grip his shoulder. He wonders why the paramedics would handle him so roughly given he is barely holding his guts inside with his own hands…

"Jesus….think of something else! Ah…Damn it… Sorry, Will."

Will feels a slap to his face. It is not a gentle slap by any means. Mist descends over Hannibal's kitchen floor, obscuring the tide of blood that seeps onto every crevice of clothing and every pore of his skin. Will feels soaking wet as the mist condenses into droplets spilling over him, rivulets of water run over his back, his hair, his face. He is melting into a pool, his brain as saturated as the rest of him.

He feels another slap but his mind relentlessly recalls his last moments of conscious thought, his eyes trained on the fallen ravenstag, its body heaving as Will struggles for each breath. The snow stag emerges from the doorway and Will's eyes shift from the dying black one to its frosted twin pacing in the hallway. Will sees the fangs and paws of the white wolf crouching behind it and he hears Daniel's voice once again.

"God Damn it…Will! Open your eyes."

His eyes flutter open to see Daniel leaning over him, one hand grasping his shoulder, the other holding onto his own stomach nearly doubled over.

"Think of something happy if you can manage it…"

Will thinks of his dogs, concentrating very hard. It is difficult to train his thoughts elsewhere. It is as if his mind wants to stay on the kitchen floor.

The whining of seven furry faces greets him at his door on the front porch. He is shaking off the snow sticking to his jacket and trousers from shoveling out his car. His breath hangs in the frigid air on the porch as the dogs watch from behind the glass. The forecast had not called for snow or he would have parked the Volvo in the barn…

Daniel's fingers release his shoulder from their grip. Will senses rather than sees Daniel's other hand drop from his stomach as he flops into his couch. The only sound Will can hear is labored breathing, his own, and Daniel's. Daniel takes in gulps of air from his seat as Will does the same. Both of them caught in the remnant of a nightmare Will has been unable to share with anyone until now.

"I can't," Daniel says, his voice cracking, "I can't experience that kind of trauma, Will. Too raw. I couldn't feel myself for a minute. I got completely lost in your memory."

Will licks his lips and sits up straight. He clenches his fist so that his nails press into his flesh grounding him. "That's never happened before? Not with any patient?" He rubs at his cheek.

"Never." Daniel assures him.

Will's face has bloomed crimson on the side where Daniel slapped him. The amount of force Daniel had to use to dislodge Will from his trance surprised him, and it certainly surprised Will. He watches Will move his jaw around, recovering from the sensation, his cheek probably still tingling.

Daniel continues to breathe in measured breaths until he is sure his emotions are his own again. He has run a gauntlet of emotions the last several sessions with Will as Will has taken him through the ordeal that haunts his every conscious thought and apparently his subconscious thoughts as well. He has not yet shared with Will his assessment, but the pain of Will's wound pales in comparison to the pain attached to other more complex emotions that have fermented in the cask of Will's mind.

The pain from the wound was far from complex. Will's emotional response to the feel of the blade was brutally simple. It felt like death to Daniel. He had felt a shock as cold as ice breach his skin joined by the throbbing of severed nerves and muscle as flesh was rent apart sending searing agony through his body. He had almost fallen to the floor. His own mind had taken over to protect him from the onslaught of emotion loosened by Will's descent into his subconscious even as he had tried to deliver the highly coded dialogue of his last conversation with one Hannibal Lecter.

The words themselves seemed to have caused Will to retreat into his mind. Will had fallen silent, tears glistening in his eyes while his mind had recreated the moments with such clarity that Will had removed himself from the warm sun filled office completely. The swell of emotional turmoil had been so visceral for Daniel that he had actually lifted his own shirt to be sure he was only imagining it.

He glances over at Will who is staring at him with a pained expression on his face. "That hurt you. You felt that." Will says, and winces at the thought of causing Daniel such distress.

"I'm ok." Daniel says, "You couldn't help it. The mind is a pretty powerful thing isn't it?"

"That's an understatement." Will says; his lips move without the grimace but his eyes still cloud with a darkness that Daniel is becoming more familiar with all the time.

“You pack quite a punch.” Will says, still moving his jaw around.

“Want some ice?”

“Not that much of a punch.” Will smiles and looks around the room, eager to change the topic.

“My tragic tale is complete and I see that you kept an impressive amount of notes. I am still waiting for the men in white jackets to appear on the other side of the door any minute now.”

Daniel laughs and picks up his notebook and pen. “I enjoy your company too much. And what does that say about me?”

Will raises his brows, tilts his head back, “What kind of crazy are you?”

“The kind with a degree. I’ll have to review all these notes later, put concerns and questions in context, so that I can frame my recommendations properly when we discuss where to go from here.” Daniel pauses, “No one could believe this, Will. I’m still processing…”

“You aren’t the only one. Why do you think I’m here?”

“I mean, there’s so much to dissect and…” Daniel stops, searching for the right words.

“swallow and digest?” Will finishes for him.

“You are very dark, Will.” Daniel says as he bites on the inside of his lower lip. “Well. While I *digest* the psychological implications of this indelicate feast, I have some other notions for you to chew on.”

“I hope they’re just as tasty…” says Will rubbing at his cheek again.

“I think perhaps too tasty, even for you, since you seem to be avoiding them, pushing them off your plate as it were.”

Will sits up straight, his sore cheek forgotten. “What would I be pushing off my plate, Daniel?”

Will has been very specific about what he has disclosed to Daniel and what he has not disclosed today. At least he thought he had. Will wants to control where the therapy goes next as much as he can.

Daniel had seemed to agree with Will’s initial assessment of how their empathy worked. Will had been honest just not entirely forthcoming. If Daniel had believed that their whiskey induced encounter had been a projection of his own emotions, Will had been disinclined to correct his assumption.

Will reminds himself that Daniel has since had time to re-evaluate that assumption and has perhaps been able to separate his own emotions from Will’s and if that is the case…

“The elephant in the room you don’t see, or you don’t want me to see.” Daniel says watching the blue eyes cloud up immediately.

Will knows Daniel is about to stop playing softball with him. Will can’t even adjust his glasses since he doesn’t bother to wear them to his sessions with Daniel anymore, not since Daniel had grabbed them off his face and looked through them. He had set them on the table and waited to see if Will would pick them back up or leave them where they were. Will had conceded that round to Daniel.

He knows Daniel is empathizing with him right now. At least he's trying to. Daniel's gaze is every bit as intense as Hannibal's, but without the calculating gleam Will remembers so well.

Will breaks eye contact and pours himself a glass of the crisp Roman spring water Daniel always keeps in the pitcher. He pauses, and then pours a glass for Daniel. Despite all his mental preparation, Will remains unprepared. It is not natural for him to open himself up to anyone.

Except Hannibal. But now, Will is not so sure that who he had shown to Hannibal was not a product of careful manipulation and conditioning. By Hannibal.

A terrible thing to have your identity taken from you.

Daniel is right. Will is motivated by his fears, specifically the fear of losing himself. Did he let Hannibal get too close? Did he finally succumb to the siren's song that both attracted and repelled? Will sips at the water, stares into the clear glass and wonders if he is that transparent to Daniel.

Daniel expects Will to be avoidant since he has yet to focus on anything besides his anger. Will is angry about being manipulated, used, and then discarded for his trouble. There is anger directed at Jack Crawford and the FBI in general. There is plenty of anger directed at Dr. Lecter. And, Will is angry with himself. His anger is a valid emotion, but anger is not the only emotion Will grapples with, not by a long shot.

Pain, regret, and guilt still roil beneath the veneer of anger Will uses to keep his narrative focused on the story as he wants to tell it, as he wants Daniel to understand it. Will is still very angry because he has yet to grieve.

Will is a waterfall of emotion to Daniel. His forts are too full to contain it all and emotion spills over Daniel scalding him like an overflowing cup of coffee. Will's narrative has confirmed for Daniel that Will blames himself for most, if not all, of what happened. Lecter's role notwithstanding, all the manipulations and plain human error are the culprits, but Will does not see it that way. Will has yet to forgive himself.

Daniel is not sure Will can do that. Will has been living a life of extremes and forgiveness could easily become atonement. Daniel has recognized that Will possesses the selflessness to skip forgiveness entirely and go straight to the sacrificial alter offering himself in a supreme act of contrition. He's not entirely convinced that there wasn't a part of Will consigned to Lecter's blade and Will was surprised when he woke up in the hospital.

Will sits behind his wall, eyes trained on his glass of water and his mouth a line as his mind retreats from truths he believes have been secreted behind his wall, until now.

When Will doesn't comment, Daniel continues, unflustered by the narrowed eyes that peek over the rim of the glass. He knew Will was very good at this game, but so is he. Will should have figured out that his unwillingness to open himself up would tell Daniel almost as much as if he had.

"We can leave the elephant for another time, after I draft some notes. But Will, the elephant is not going to go away. I know this is uncomfortable for you."

Will shakes his head, looks about the room searching for anything to hang his attentions on but Daniel's face. This is not how he planned on introducing the topic of… Will doesn't even finish his thought. His jaw goes tight and he can't stop grinding his teeth. He is making things worse and he can't help it.

The rapport they have created should be a comfort, but Will has not been out of his own head about his relationship with Hannibal. It feels like another betrayal to talk about him, about himself, to dissect something so *intimate*, even with Daniel.

Daniel sits watching the storm crash across Will's features as he stares at the bookcases. His jaw moves slightly from side to side. Daniel doesn't require his empathy to read the indignation in Will's eyes, or the penitent way he angles his head toward the carpet. Daniel knows Will has turned himself inside out and exhausted every avenue of reflection alone. He had to before he could accept Daniel's help.

Daniel is sure that Will could not have had time during those weeks leading up to the bloodbath in Lecter's kitchen, to analyze much of anything. He had been operating on instinct and had spent most of his time with Lecter, unable to step outside the condensed and highly concentrated universe the two of them had created for themselves. It is only now that Will has been afforded the opportunity to parse and examine events in any meaningful way. One thing Will cannot do is be objective.

Wills sits on the edge of the couch, hunched forward, arms taut against his knees. He has exchanged his fascination with the bookcase for his half full glass of water.

Daniel cannot take the tension any longer. Someone has to pop the big elephant balloon if only to stop saying elephant.

"Will, I know about the sex." Daniel watches Will flinch at the words.

"You and Hannibal had sex. Crazy psychopath sex. I can't wait to hear about it."

Will's head snaps around so fast and his eyes are so large that Daniel clamps down on his tongue to stifle whatever moronic expression he knows is about to spread over his face. But the avoidance has to stop and Daniel is betting his inappropriate humor will appeal to Will's own dry variety.

Will stares at Daniel, his mouth hangs open. He snaps his jaw shut. His face feels hotter now than it had from the slap of a couple minutes ago.

"Fuck you, Daniel."

Will covers his mouth with a hand in the hopes of hiding the grin beneath it. He fails miserably. He closes his eyes and sits quietly, composing himself.

Daniel is watching the crimson blush from his slap creep along Will's neck to radiate deep down even past the unbuttoned buttons of his shirt and Daniel finds that amazing. Will is full of contradictions, but blushing after some of the things Daniel knows he has done, is just…well, charming really. Will must be unbearably charming lying prone upon a bed.

Hannibal Lecter must have eaten him alive.

Will puts his hand down, but his mouth keeps twisting around the words perched on his tongue. He finally licks his lips, purses them together, without opening his eyes.

“That was perhaps the most effective therapeutic approach I have ever encountered.”

Will opens his eyes, engaging Daniel once again, his expression placid. Daniel notes how Will can slip from expression to expression as easily as he would a shirt.

“High praise coming from you. You’re welcome.” Daniel says, reaching for his glass of water.

He feels hot. His shirt feels a little damp. He would like to splash the entire glass of water over his head. He realizes he is empathizing with Will.

The degree of embarrassment can only be proportional to the actions that prompted it. Will is extremely embarrassed. Ergo…

Will flicks a lock of hair off his forehead, runs his fingers through the ringlets that cover his head on this humid summer day and Daniel wishes he would stop. Will should know how he must appear right now, but he really does not. He is not aware that Daniel is once again tied up in knots.

Daniel’s compassion for Will is constantly at odds with his attraction to him. Will is emotionally compromised and his patient. He shouldn’t be thinking about Will sexually at all but if Daniel thought for even a second that Will was aware of the effect he had… there is not a couch in this room where he would be safe.

Daniel finishes off his glass of water, wipes his lips. He looks over at Will who is engrossed in the fabric of his couch again. Will glances up at Daniel. He raises his eyebrows, inviting Daniel to speak.

“So we can talk about the sex now, huh?” Daniel says. He pours himself another glass.

“When did you know?” Will asks.

Will does not miss how Daniel deflects, distracting himself so he doesn’t have to look at Will directly. Will is not sure if Daniel is handling him or avoiding him. Probably both. Will concedes that discussing sex with him will be awkward for Daniel.

“Almost from the beginning, but I only had anecdotal evidence, observations. And you did your very best to avoid, obfuscate, and misdirect.”

Will nods his head. “But we got drunk.”

“And that pretty much cinched it. Yes.” Daniel decides to continue with the conversation since Will seems amenable at the moment. “You didn’t stop just because we were drunk.”

“Not entirely, no. You’re pretty good at this.”

“Yes. I am.”

“You did remember, then?”

“No, I mirrored your behavior, your emotions and I really did drink more than I could handle. I don’t have your tolerance.”

“Then, how did you know?”

“I woke up the next morning with a huge headache and wisps of residual emotions, yours and mine.” Daniel takes a sip of water, “I’ve had time since then to observe and deduce. Look, Will, your forts are not as secure as you think.”

“You let me believe I’m closed off to you?” Will says, jaw working again.

“You are closed off, but I’ve gotten to know you better so you aren’t as locked up to me now. I was interacting with you like I do everyone else…”

“And I’m not everyone else. I understand.” Will exhales and nods, purses his lips. “You’ve had to modify your thinking for me.”

“Pretty much. But I learn quickly.”

“Yes, you certainly do.” Will says allowing his head to roll back. Will figures he can make it a lot easier on himself if he just trusts Daniel to do his job. Daniel has been more than patient with him. The last obstacle has just been removed. Will relaxes a little into his seat the stone around his neck feels a little lighter now.

Will’s fingers knead at the fabric of his jeans and his eyes begin to wander around the room, a signal he has had enough for one day. Daniel decides he has had enough, too. He has some other notions Will might find more to his liking before they end the session.

“Let’s change topics, shall we?” Daniel pauses, offers Will a grin. “For now, I’ll commend you on following my instructions about your health. It shows. You look a lot better than you did a couple weeks ago.”

Daniel feels the relief from Will as if he had sighed out loud. Daniel understands why he is so resistant. It is easier for Will to discuss the murder and the cannibalism than the sex. His relationship with Hannibal is unique. And highly unconventional, given that Will would rather talk about killing and eating people.

Daniel prefers to broach the topic of sex with Dr. Lecter elsewhere, not here, in his office.

“Writing down everything I eat and drink plus an hour a day at a gym seems to be working.” Will is saying, “I have to admit I feel better.” Will’s tone is conversational, giving no hint of his discomfort of a moment ago. “I had things to work on at home, to occupy my mind…but here…I don’t.”

“You can’t expect to confront Lecter if you aren’t physically healthy. It is unreasonable to think your mind can withstand him without proper physical support.”

Will knows Hannibal would have kept himself fit all this time. His hobbies required a pronounced degree of physical fitness and Will is sure Hannibal is swimming laps in a pool somewhere.

“I know. So what now? Do I still have to keep a diet log for you?”

“If you don’t mind, I think I will monitor your eating habits a little longer.”

“I mind, but that makes no difference to you, does it?”

“Not really.” Daniel smiles and begins to gather his notes to peruse later once Will has left. “Getting you healthy physically is a priority. Still having trouble sleeping though, huh?”

“Always have. That is not going to change.”

“Oh, it may in the future, when and if your relationship status changes.”

Will raises a brow, but says nothing. He forgets how perceptive Daniel is and he shouldn’t.

Intimacy, he thinks is always a double edged sword. The pairing of blade and intimacy is not lost on Will. He sighs and returns his thoughts to Daniel who sits patiently waiting for him to connect again.

No wonder his sessions take so long. Will’s mind works so quickly that talking to Daniel sometimes feels like operating in slow motion. His frequent lapses into his own skull cause delays as well.

Daniel is very aware of the passage of time and acutely aware of Will’s limits. He will have to push beyond those limits soon if he is to help Will come to grips with the battle waging inside. Allowing Will a comfort zone has been necessary, but remaining within that zone is no longer an option. They made a lot of progress today and now they will have to build on it.

“Recreation is important to your mental health and while eating better and getting some regular exercise is important, it is not enough. So, I’m going to give you some homework.”

“Homework?”

“As a former teacher, you are familiar with the concept?”

“What do you have in mind?” Will groans inwardly at the thought of keeping another log, or worse, a diary of some kind. He hopes Daniel is not going to propose dream analysis.

“I want you to plan a fishing trip. You are going to teach me how to fly fish.”

Daniel is pleased at the surprised smile that spreads across Will’s face. Even his eyes brighten at the idea. His response is entirely genuine and spontaneous as Daniel hoped it would be.

“You want me to plan it? I have no idea where to go. I don’t have any gear with me. And it’s not the sort of hobby you just throw together…” Immediately, Will begins to catalog the reasons for not going and wonders to himself why he does that.

“I didn’t think so. That’s why you are planning the trip, not me. Get online and become familiar with the area. I can tell you that the Tevere and the Nera rivers are famous for their trout and grayling, whatever grayling are… There are guide services that get the licenses for you and so on.”

“You checked ahead a little, didn’t you?” Will asks.

“Well yes, I had to know if it was possible before I threw it out there.” Daniel responds, “Tell me what is required and I will take care of all that. I will drive since I know the area. Just a day trip, nothing too involved. But I think a day away from here would be good for you.”

“When would you want to go?”

“Anytime. You know Will, most of us have the weekends off.”

“Right.” Will smiles. He doesn’t think in terms of a five day work week. He hasn’t in a long time. A weekend trip actually sounds good. He could pick up some supplies on the way home tonight; take out the fishing kit he packed containing lures he hasn’t bothered to look at since he arrived.

“You really want to buy the rods and everything? That can run you a lot…”

“I got this. It is my idea, I’ll pay for it. We can probably rent most of what we need. Just make sure the location is within driving distance for a day trip. I am not into camping. Not at all.”

Daniel’s tone is quite serious, but Will knows that while the fishing is relaxing, at least for him, to the uninitiated, fishing all day in a stream while standing against a constant current is likely to be a rather fatiguing experience. Hauling gear and cleaning the catch is no day at the beach. Daniel is not going to feel like driving home afterward.

“I don’t think you know what you are in for. How about I check for rooms just in case.”

Daniel considers for a moment. “As long as there are no tents and campfires, fine.”

“No tents, promise. I suppose I should book a large room.”

“What for?” Daniel says, not following at all.

“For the elephant.” Will deadpans.

Daniel simply stares at Will. The comment is so very wrong, yet, for them, it seems just right.

“Don’t tease.” He says finally. Just to make sure Will understands, he adds, “And…separate rooms.”

Will places a hand over his chest. "I'm heartbroken. Well, in that case, can I bring the libation?” Will says, with hopeful smile. “It’s part of the experience.”

“Absolutely not. Are you crazy?” Daniel pauses, “Forget I said that. This is therapy. And, make it sooner rather than later please. Like within the next couple weekends.” Daniel says trying not to laugh at Will’s perturbed expression.

“Have you ever been fishing? Any kind of fishing?” Will asks.

“Nope.”

“Hunting?”

“Never.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Then, this is going to be an especially interesting trip. For both of us.”

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Will's dreams are not the worst of his problems.

He stands in the middle of his bedroom, eyes closed, letting the air dry the perspiration that tingles on his skin. He listens to himself breathe in the darkness. He tries not to think of anything at all.
No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love…
He can’t remember what it feels like not to live in fear and wonders if he ever has. His memory simply doesn’t go back far enough. He has always lived in fear of something or other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 16

Will’s dreams are not the worst of his problems.

“All our destinies flying and swimming in blood and emptiness.”

Hannibal’s voice whispers in Will’s mind. He is squatting in the familiar woods again, tracking the animals that haunt his dreams.

He has followed the stag’s tracks from the stream through the snow. Icicles hang from the tree branches, the branches and trees shine in the semi-darkness with a glaze of ice that reflects the light from the moon. The entire forest glitters in the moonlight dead and frozen in time, an eternal winter.

Will’s feet crunch into the layer of ice that covers the snow encrusted ground. He thinks the tracks are fresh; the powder of snow kicked up by the hooves is not yet stuck to the ice. The ice crystals lay across the surface like crushed diamonds on a pane of glass. He continues, the sounds of the stream becoming faint in the windless night.

At last he reaches a thicket of trees, black and slick with the coating of ice that wraps the wood in its shroud of lifelessness and silence. But the thicket is not empty of all life. Despite his jacket, thick pants, and boots, the frigid air permeates and Will’s blood quickens in his veins as he peers inside the thicket.

The white ravenstag strikes at the ground with its hooves, feathers ripple along its neck. Its head is lowered and its body quakes with each belabored breath it takes. Will’s eyes grow large stinging with the cold. He sees a jagged scar on the belly of the stag; it spreads half the length of its belly, cross wise then up, like his own. Will sees the raised fleshy scar of the stag pulsing from where he stands. He knows what is coming.

He instinctively presses his hand over his stomach fingers digging into the jacket as he watches the stag tremble and snort as the scar ripples and bursts wide, spewing out the slippery thing Will has already seen and felt slither out of his own belly. But the mass of blood, talons, and feathers does not claw its way up the stag’s legs.

He watches the thing uncoil itself and his fascination and repulsion intensify as the stag begins to nudge it around on the ground, cleaning the bloody slime from it with its tongue. The thing thrashes on the frozen ground as the thin layer of ice beneath it cracks and gives way so the thing is trailing wet bloody slick all over the snow.

Will hears a growl behind him and turns to see the white wolf edging closer. Will hasn’t brought a gun, but he thinks he doesn’t need one. The wolf is not baring its fangs at him. Will remains still and the wolf comes closer until it is close enough to touch him. Close enough so Will notices the ice crystals embedded in its thick fur.

The wolf brushes its head against Will’s leg, nudging him forward. Will turns back around to the stag and the thing writhing about in the snow.

“Wounds are supposed to heal.” He says aloud. “Why won’t you heal?”

“Everything I have done has been to help you, Will.” Hannibal whispers.

“No.”

Will stands still watching the stag and the thing, blinking the snowflakes from his lashes. His fingers absently graze the soft furry ears of the wolf standing beside him. His other hand still presses against his jacket. The thing is less a thing now and more of a bird. Will sees the feathers, the scaly legs, and the talons and beak emerge sleek, shiny, and black like onyx.

“No, everything you have done…you did for you.” Will says clenching his jaw so he doesn’t feel so…empty.

“We’re orchestrations of carbon. You and me, Will.”

“And Jack…” Will says softly.

“And Jack, too…all our destinies flying and swimming in blood and emptiness.” Hannibal’s voice intones in his head.

Eyes, golden hued and rimmed blood red peer at Will over the onyx beak, a predator’s eyes.

Jack is suddenly standing next to Will, like an ice burg in his heavy tan overcoat hands in pockets looking grim as usual. “Don’t let empathy confuse what you want with what Lecter wants.”

“I didn’t.”

Will watches the stag step backward and away so the majestic black feathered eagle can take flight. He listens until the rustle of wings is swallowed in the silence of the snow crusted wood. It is his own heartbeat that jars him awake.

It is still dark outside when Will opens his eyes. He squints at his clock on the night stand. 4:12 the green light reads. He takes a few more deep breaths before he sits up kicking off the sheet. He tugs at his tee. It clings to his back and Will feels the familiar damp chill spreading under his arms.

At least the sheet wasn’t balled up in his fists this time. Will isn’t sure which dreams are worse; the ones in the woods, the ones in the kitchen, or the ones with Hannibal. He grins. All his dreams are about Hannibal, aren’t they?

He used to kill Hannibal in his dreams. There was always blood, plenty of it. His entire face and body would be awash in it as he would slip out of the dream, aware of his fingers slowly uncurling in release and satisfaction as images of cascading fountains of blood had shot into the air. He had lain in his solitary bed in Wolf Trap listening to his breathing aware of his physical reaction to the violence.

He had felt simultaneously pleased and afraid.

Those dreams had given way to different dreams. He no longer kills Hannibal in his dreams. But the release is equally visceral. He’s not sure how he feels about that.

There is no release, no quiet satisfaction after dreams in the woods. He feels only fear.

Sleep is such an elusive concept, so fluid that it slips through Will’s fingers like a fast moving stream.

He knows he was sleeping better a couple weeks ago. He acknowledges that the nightmares resumed about the time his sessions with Daniel began to concentrate on recent events and his relationship with…his former psychiatrist.

Will does not want to think about Hannibal, does not want to think about sleeping in his bed in Baltimore. Does not want to recall the delicious way the satin slipped over his skin, fresh from the shower or the way the pillows smelled of spiced leather, sandalwood, and aged whiskey. The way his blood had throbbed in his veins alive and hot every time his nose had inhaled the scent of *him* as his face was crushed against those same soft pillows the taste of soft kisses still upon his lips.

Does not want to remember the way that elusive stream of sleep had not slipped through his fingers but had washed over him and he had closed his eyes to sink warm and safe into his dreams. Will rubs his face with his hands, massages his neck, breathes in, then out, in…out.

Will remembers the white stag and wolf had entered his dreamscape after his initial consultation with Daniel. Will's dreams had been odd, confusing perhaps, but not sweat inducing. He knows that the dreams of the subconscious convey the unspoken fears of the conscious.

Dreams prepare us for waking life.

Will's mouth twists and he feels his eyes growing moist. He trembles as he exhales, shakes off the sharp twinge he feels constricting his chest. He swallows down the lump he feels forming in his throat. He steels himself once again to the knowledge that this is his life, such as it is.

He pulls off the sweaty tee, wipes his face and head with it before throwing it on the floor. He rummages around his drawer for a fresh one. There aren't any.

He glances at the laundry basket full of his dirty clothes and realizes he has no clean sheets either. He has slept on a stripped down mattress before and it wasn't even as clean this one. At least he doesn't have to stare at a chipped sink and rust stained toilet.

A flash of light illuminates the room for a fraction of a second. Residual images from the light disappear before Will can process what they are, like after images from the flash of a camera. He thinks maybe it was lightening but there is no thunder.

Heat lightning, he thinks. It is summer.

The small bedroom vibrates just enough so Will tenses his legs, making sure his feet are firmly rooted to the floor. He rubs his eyes with his fingers massaging eyelids that sting from the inside out he is so tired.

He stumbles over to the window, on the far side of the room, moves the thin curtains aside and raises the slated blinds. It is completely dark outside, save for tiny points of light in the distance. No moon, thinks Will.

He touches the glass with his fingers and decides to open the window wide despite the air conditioning. He needs to hear something besides the din of the ancient system that is supposed to cool his suite.

The window will not budge. Will knows he opened the window last night, and the night before that. After struggling for a few more seconds he lets his hands fall to his sides figuring the humidity has warped the wood of the jambs and casings. He will have to look at it in the morning.

He stands in the middle of his bedroom, eyes closed, letting the air dry the perspiration that tingles on his skin. He listens to himself breathe in the darkness. He tries not to think of anything at all.

No forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love…

He can’t remember what it feels like not to live in fear and wonders if he ever has. His memory simply doesn’t go back far enough. He has always lived in fear of something or other.

If not his fear of succumbing to the allure of the urges awakened by Hobbs and courted by Hannibal; then he lived in fear that the emotions of those around him, and later, the emotions of the killers he chased, would slowly erode who he was a little at a time. He has fought his entire life it seems to hold on to who he believes he is.

I know who I am…

Will decides not to try to go back to sleep. He walks into the bathroom to take a leak and freezes at the door.

There is a night light plugged into the socket by the sink casting the small tiled bath in an orange glow. He does not remember any night light nor does he recall buying one. He turns to run his fingers across the door jamb to flip the light switch and the bathroom is flooded with overhead light. The night light is gone.

Will blinks his eyes several times. Was he sleepwalking just now? He takes his leak and leans over the sink to rinse his hands. He splashes his face with the cool water that runs over his fingers. He lets the cold water wake him completely.

When he returns to his bedroom he looks to the clock. 6:04 the LED light reads.

Draw me a clock, Will.

Will sinks slowly into the swivel chair at his computer desk. He wipes his hands over his face as he rests his elbows against the arms of the chair. He tries very hard to stop the shaking.

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When Daniel takes Will’s call in his office that morning shortly after nine, he immediately recognizes the anxiety in Will’s voice.

“I need to ask you something.” Will says, his voice quietly intense.

“Go ahead. I’ve got time.”

“Have you ever…Did you ask me to draw clocks for you?” Will says.

“What? No. Like the ones Lecter had you draw?”

“Yeah, to ground me in the present.”

Will wants reassurance he has not lost time with Daniel. Reassurance that Daniel has not or would not keep it from him. He needs Daniel’s paddle, he can’t keep losing paddles.

“Will, I’ve never asked you to draw me anything. You are always…present with me, and I tell you when you zone out. You are aware when you do it…at least in my office. What happened?”

Daniel knows if Will is asking about clocks, he has suffered a blackout. The question is which memory has triggered this one.

There is a long pause at the other end.

Will does not want to tell Daniel everything, not over the phone. He quickly decides on an acceptable abbreviated version. They can talk later. Daniel will not be satisfied with a phone call anyway.

Will takes a breath, exhales slowly, “I think I went someplace else for a couple hours. I woke up from a dream around 4 a.m., went to the bathroom, came back in my room around 6 a.m.”

“Ok. So you lost time after waking from a dream. What did you dream about?”

“The usual…”

Daniel sighs at the avoidance. Daniel thinks Will the most stubborn person he has ever met. But that stubbornness is also indicative of an incredibly strong personality and the resolve to protect it. Daniel knows Will’s dreams would offer even more insight into Will’s fears, but he holds his dreams close so he can protect them, too.

Will’s dreams can wait until their next session or, even better, until their fishing trip this weekend. Will had dutifully done his homework.

“Were you looking in the mirror when you blanked out?”

“Is that important?” Will says sounding defensive and curious at the same time.

“Could be. Sometimes looking in the mirror after waking from a dream can cause a person to drift back into a dream state if they weren’t completely awake. A kind of stupor. Alcohol doesn’t help.”

“I don’t remember if I was looking in the mirror or not. But, the bathroom looked different for a minute…” Will’s voice trails off, “I…maybe I wasn’t completely awake.”

“Whatever happened, it has unnerved you. You didn’t leave your apartment?”

“No, I know when I’m dreaming, Daniel. I wasn’t walking in my sleep. This was different.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Awake.”

“That’s good,” Daniel says, his tone upbeat for Will’s sake. “I mean besides that. Are you ok to be alone, or do you want to catch a cab here?”

“I’m calm. I am concerned, not panicked.”

Will’s voice is hoarse, dry and Daniel knows he has had a miserable night. He may say he’s not panicked, but his tone suggests otherwise.

“I know this probably feels like you’re regressing, but sometimes a person will retreat into familiar behaviors when faced with the prospect of adopting new ones. You are being introduced to new ways of thinking about yourself and what happened to you.”

"It doesn't feel like regression. It feels like I never left."

"In a way you haven't I suppose. You have been reliving very traumatic events, Will. And you remember things and process things very differently than most people. Any number of memories or emotions could have triggered an episode."

"Chilton told me that blackouts could resume under the right circumstances even without the encephalitis because my brain had already adjusted to the stimuli."

"He's right. Even without the drugs, the illness, or the strobe lights, your brain has already rewired itself. Still, there has to be a catalyst to set it off. If this is the case, then we need to figure out what the trigger is."

"Do you think the encephalitis has come back?"

"No, but it would be easy to find out, if you want to make sure. I can refer you to someone, or you can pick your own."

Will is quiet on the other end. Daniel shifts in his seat, waits for Will to speak again. He had anticipated something like this might happen. He wonders if this is the first time, or if Will has been keeping other incidents to himself.

"Will?" Daniel says after listening to him exhale for long enough. "Do you think I've slipped you anything? Manipulated you somehow?"

"I don't want to think that. Always direct aren't you?"

"I try. I told you I wouldn't do anything without your knowledge or permission and I haven't. I have prescribed nothing for you but a healthy lifestyle and a fishing trip."

"I hate feeling like this, this…not trusting people." Will breathes into the phone, and his breath carries with it a weariness Daniel feels coiling around his own chest and shoulders.

"Unfortunately, experience has taught you that you can't."

"So, what now?"

Will doesn't really expect a complete answer or even a solution to his immediate problem, but he knows whatever Daniel says will be a balm for his mind, even over the phone, and that is the reason he called.

"I'm not going to tell you it's nothing and not to worry about it. But it might not be a bad thing. Your mind, your imagination, works so differently from everyone else's that it is possible you are trying to piece some things together in your subconscious and this is how your mind is used to doing that."

"I guess I can lay off the whiskey before I go to sleep, huh?" Will says sounding more like himself; at least the Will Daniel has come to know.

"Might help. But what do I know?" Daniel says.

"Thanks, Daniel. I'll see you tomorrow then." Will says and hangs up.

Will stares at his phone. Daniel makes sense. He always makes sense. It is so easy to trust him. To trust in the reason of his words and the calm confidence in his gentle voice. To trust in the expressive green eyes that miss nothing and often cause Will to flush warmly beneath his collar.

Daniel tugs at Will's emotions in ways his psychiatrist should not. But when has he ever had a conventional relationship with psychiatrists?

He pulls out clean clothes from the antique wardrobe and sets them aside. He needs a shower first. Then, he can tackle the laundry and pack for the trip.

He tugs at the curtains to let the full sun in the room, brightening it. It is a pleasant enough room. Mason had arranged for the suite in a renovated palazzo once part of a larger estate near the Palazzo Pitti and the Boboli Gardens.

Too bad Mason had never seen it. While it was swimming in old world charm, and was no doubt pricey, the suite left a lot to be desired in modern amenities. The electrical wiring was faulty and the plumbing was temperamental. Will had to constantly remind himself that the faucets in the kitchen had been hooked up backwards. He could not get used to turning the knob for hot when he wanted a glass of water.

The temperamental plumbing also meant several trips to the basement if he wanted to wash his own clothes. Everyone in the building used the community laundry room, a spacious work area once the domain of servants. There was a laundry service, but Will preferred the routine of doing his own. When he kept the routine.

Will frowns at the overflowing basket. He will be engaged in the routine for a while today. And he can take a look at the stuck window.

As he readies for the shower he thinks of the Paolini twins. They must have reached their destination by now. Will needs as much background as he can find on Hannibal if he is to fully understand what makes him tick. Everyone has a weakness that can be exploited, even Hannibal. Will just has to figure out what that weakness is.

Weakness is an expression of emotion. Hannibal's true emotions are masked beneath varnish thick and resistant. It's hard to know what you're getting beneath the layers of deceit.

Unlike Will. Will's emotions are exposed like fresh scars scratched on his skin. Will wraps his scars in garments of sarcasm and avoidance. Garments too sheer to withstand Hannibal's scrutiny.

Will acts on his emotions, but so does Hannibal. Not the emotions he puts on display, the other ones. The ones Will had seen fleetingly, the sincere unrehearsed emotions in rare moments of unguarded honesty.

The emotions he indulged.

Whimsy as Du Maurier had put it, may speak to self-congratulation, but Will needs to know what truly motivates the whimsy, and Hannibal. Whimsy had not been a random choice. Du Maurier had chosen her words carefully.

Will understands the word in its conventional sense, but whimsy is not always accompanied by laughter. Whimsy can erupt in shadows as well as light.

Beneath the amusing wit there is an undercurrent of arbitrariness and a lack of responsibility. At least in the moment of whimsy.

What would appeal to Hannibal's whimsy? What acts of whimsy had Will already witnessed from him?

Her name was Mischa.

Was?

She's dead.

Abigail. Abigail had been whimsy's muse.

Had Hannibal gazed down upon Will as he had knelt in shock attempting to staunch the flow of blood from the wound in her neck and decided on a whim to actively intervene? Or had he done so because standing there helpless with an MD after his name would have appeared odd? Rude?

Then, later, as Will had paced on the upper level of his Baltimore office sounding off about his psych evaluation and Jack, Hannibal had pointed out how Will had orphaned Abigail by killing her father and how Hannibal had orphaned her by saving her life.

You saved her life too. Do you feel obligated?

Yes. I feel a staggering amount of obligation. I feel responsibility. I've fantasized about scenarios where my actions may have allowed a different fate for Abigail Hobbs.

Will did not doubt that sentiment now. Hannibal's act of whimsy had had consequences. Hannibal's entire life had become unraveled after that dragging collateral carnage with him. In his conceit, Hannibal had likely imagined he could control the consequences. Hannibal's curiosity is his whimsy. He usually did not feel any sense of responsibility for what followed.

Did God feel responsible for the fall of man after placing Adam and Eve in the garden?

But Abigail had been different. She had reminded Hannibal of his sister. Abigail had filled a space left vacant by her loss. Hannibal had not been actively seeking a surrogate, but he had reacted emotionally to the scene in Hobbs' kitchen. He had made a life altering decision as he had gently moved Will's shaking hands from Abigail's throat to wrap his practiced hands around the gaping wound instead.

In that moment he had bound all of them to his act of whimsy.

Will was meant to fill a void within Hannibal, too. Hannibal had found a daughter in Abigail and a companion in Will.

Hannibal harbors a deep unrequited need for family. Until Will knows what happened to Hannibal and his family, he can only guess at how that need figures into Hannibal's elusive pathology. Hannibal's psyche is as elusive as the dark forest in Will's dreams.

Will is determined about one thing. He will not face Hannibal again without a fully stocked arsenal. Hannibal had spent plenty of time digging around the minefield in Will's head. The least he can do is return the favor.

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Daniel looks up from his phone and clicks it off. He glances at the gulls suspended over waves in the beach print on his wall. Will is like the gulls in the photograph, lost in a moment that replays on an endless loop in his mind. A fort he has kept locked up tightly.

Daniel finally holds the key. He needs only to turn it in the lock. He hopes he is prepared for whatever comes spilling out. He had better be. Will keeps his forts locked tight for a reason.

Daniel decides that instead of picking up Will at his apartment tomorrow, he should invite Will to have dinner and spend the night at his place, meet the dogs. Be social.

They could leave a little later in the morning, be less rushed. He could get an idea of Will's sleep habits and see for himself how bad the nightmares are. Will calls them dreams which makes Daniel wonder how bad they would have to be for him to refer to them as the nightmares they truly are. No one wakes up from mere dreams soaked in sweat and shaking from a subconscious seizure.

Will's fear colors his perception, the way his empathy transforms everything he sees and touches. He lives the nightmares that follow him out of his dreams. He lives in fear of waking up.

Will could use some time away from his files and empty apartment. He pulls Will's file, makes some notes about their conversation, and pages his receptionist to send up his first patient.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Notes: Picture is from a poster for the Mississinewa 1812 First Annual Mississinewa Battlefield Society Rendezvous Oct 15-16 1988, a gift from a friend who engages in reenactments, and remembered my love of history. I found the scene hauntingly appropriate for Will's dreamscape.

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Hannibal decides to check out Doctor Clayton for himself. He's not what Hannibal expected.

As Doctor Clayton climbs out of his unbearably hot car, he pauses to brush damp curls off his forehead. The incline of his head and the way the shadows play over his face as he completes the simple gesture are enough to give Hannibal pause.
For the briefest of seconds, it is Will fussing with errant curls and un-tucked shirt as he leans on Hannibal’s freshly waxed Bentley.

Chapter 17

Hannibal decides to check out Doctor Clayton for himself. He's not what Hannibal expected.

Hannibal sits outside one of the numerous cafes that open onto the street across from Dr. Clayton’s office suites. Via delle Burelia is a couple blocks from the restaurant he likes on Via Ghibellina, and very close to Teatro Verdi. The architecture is exquisitely preserved with an understated refinement.

Hannibal has resisted the temptation to go inside. He imagines the interior to be at least as elegant as the outside. He has come here to observe, not to interfere. The deep claret colored Mercedes was already here when Hannibal arrived, parked in an alley lined with more practically priced vehicles. The alley was still bathed in sunlight bearing down from the east.

Hannibal does not plan on spending his day in the café, no matter how inviting the menu.

Soon, the sun will be high overhead and there will no respite from the heat. He is already hot despite the refuge the tall structures provide his side of the street.

The temperature has been rising steadily with the sun and Hannibal loosens the buttons of his cream colored shirt. He opens the fabric wide revealing the sheen of perspiration already on his skin. He lifts his face to feel the warmth alight upon his nose and cheeks.

The warmth of the Tuscan sun invigorates his soul and his wilted shirt is forgotten.

He has brought his sketch book and assorted charcoals with him. The charcoal pencils and scalpel lay across the glass table top while the sketch book rests in his lap.

He has framed out the entire end of the street, captured its picturesque beauty, stucco and terra cotta surrounded by a little sea of shade and foliage in a city claimed by stone long ago.

He has been here all morning, captivated as always by the people around him as he sipped his cappuccino and read the paper. There has been a dearth of activity around *Ventresca and Associate*, however.

As far as Hannibal can tell, only two patients had appointments this morning and they have since departed. Dr. Clayton must be working in his office. Hannibal hopes he will catch a glimpse of him when he takes a lunch break.

Then again, he may take his lunch at his desk. Hannibal would very much like to see him in the flesh. The singular photo of him in Du Maurier's slim dossier had been small and included at the end of an article along with annotated references.

The grainy photo he had retrieved from his camera and the pages of documents had shed no light on Du Maurier's interest in the young doctor. He was successful and handsome, but Hannibal doubts Du Maurier would be seeking any meaningful relationship with him. Not that sex wasn't meaningful, but Du Maurier's tastes were eclectic.

She was welcome to her occasional diversions and appetites as was Hannibal. Hannibal did not demand or expect exclusivity in that area and he was certain that she did not expect it from him. It would not surprise Hannibal if she investigated potential sexual partners before engaging them. She was circumspect to the last detail after all.

It is the resemblance to Will that nags at Hannibal. Other similarities, that he is single and lives alone; are incidental and insignificant. Hannibal does admit that the doctor's affinity for dogs and therapy has Will written all over it, but that too is incidental. Except for the face he is simply one of thousands of psychiatrists practicing in Italy.

Except for the face, Hannibal could believe Du Maurier is chasing a pretty diversion. Because of the face, Hannibal thinks there is more to Du Maurier's apparent fascination with him.

Du Maurier has not mentioned this psychiatrist or offered a clue as to why she collected a dossier on him. The resemblance may simply be incidental. The dossier contains mostly professional information and copies of his few published works and lectures.

Her curiosity seems collegial. And yet, that episode in the hot tub had been anything but.

Hannibal's phone rings softly in his pocket. As though thinking of the devil had caused her to appear, the call is from Du Maurier.

"Hannibal." Du Maurier says, enunciating each syllable as usual. "Do you have a moment?"

"Of course. What is on your mind?" Hannibal says as he lifts his eyes to the structure across the street.

"I am visiting my patient in Fiesole, and she was happy to accommodate my request for a case of that wine you liked so much. Will you be home this afternoon to receive it?"

"I can be."

“Oh…where are you?”

“In the city, enjoying the view.” Hannibal says as he watches a young man emerge from the office suites and approach the Mercedes.

The street is narrow; Hannibal sits perhaps three car lengths away from him. He is wearing a pale blue shirt and trousers the color of sand. His glasses catch the sun, as do the keys he procures from his jacket.

Hannibal’s eyes narrow as he notices the curve of his jaw, the way the brown locks of hair fall over his forehead and curl over his ears and brush the collar of his shirt. He sports a beard, clipped close. He had been clean shaven in the photo, his hair much shorter, a rather dated photo Hannibal decides.

He is about Will’s age, not as young as he appears in the photo.

“Ah” she pauses, “When might you be returning to Impruneta, then?”

“A couple of hours I should think.”

Hannibal is squinting now as he stares across the street at Doctor Clayton. Clayton unlocks the car and opens the door, leans inside. Hannibal watches him twist his way into the back seat, body angled so that the pleasing lines of his physique move sensuously beneath fabric. Hannibal watches him wrestle with something in the back seat.

“Then shall I tell her to send it after one or two? I know there is no one there to accept the delivery. The wine should not sit outside in this heat.”

“No, most thoughtful of you to call. After two will be fine. Please extend my thanks for her generosity.”

“I certainly will. Perhaps we can all share a glass together soon.”

As Doctor Clayton climbs out of his unbearably hot car, he pauses to brush damp curls off his forehead. The incline of his head and the way the shadows play over his face as he completes the simple gesture are enough to give Hannibal pause.

For the briefest of seconds, it is Will fussing with errant curls and untucked shirt as he leans on Hannibal’s freshly waxed Bentley.

Hannibal’s nostril’s twitch, an eyelid tics. The longing is…visceral.

“I look forward to meeting my mysterious benefactor. Is there anything else?” Hannibal intones into the phone, his words nothing more than lines from a script.

“No. Ciao, Hannibal.”

Hannibal clicks off the phone without answering. The young doctor has retrieved a gym bag from his back seat. He slings it over his shoulder and heads off down the street and around a corner.

Hannibal does not move to follow him. He sits contemplating the wound Will has carved into his heart. Once again, he has managed to reach into Hannibal’s chest and rip out another piece. The regret smolders inside as Hannibal silently cauterizes the wound.

He aches not because the doctor reminds him of Will, but because he is not Will.

Forgiveness does simply happen, apparently.

Du Maurier's agenda with the young doctor becomes clearer. She had hoped to watch Hannibal's reaction to seeing him. Then, she would sit back and watch what Hannibal would do with him. Perhaps she even intends to share him; a novelty to pry Hannibal away from his retreats into his memory palace.

The request for the property deeds and stock was supposed to placate her. Hannibal thinks he has least confused her. Just as lack of trust in others increases the need for religion, confusion increases the need for clarity. She is seeking clarity about him.

Somehow, she happened upon this doctor and has decided to use him to further her agenda with Hannibal.

He will bide his time until Du Maurier presents him with the invitation he imagines is forthcoming. He will play her game of chess a while longer until he can ascertain her intentions.

Du Maurier is predictable. Her existence revolves around one equation, and the math is simple. A life with Hannibal insures her investment. Each holds one of the bank account codes required to access the investment. Balance on either side.

Hannibal's obsession with Will introduced an unknown variable. She means to control the variable still. To remove it without accounting for the unknown variables on the other side invites chaos.

Du Maurier despises chaos. Hannibal likes a little chaos from time to time. Gets the blood pumping. Perhaps introducing a little chaos into Du Maurier's ordered existence would get her blood pumping in a way it has not in a very long time. Hannibal would like to see that.

Du Maurier likely sees her dilemma reduced to subtraction. Killing Will outright would have invited retribution. No bank codes for Du Maurier for that one. Killing him outright would invite disaster. His bank codes would die with him. She might have considered killing him years ago when the stakes were not so high. She likely regrets her inaction. Sending him to jail would still leave her with no bank codes. She would soon be joining him. Hannibal would see to that. Unless she could manage it without showing her hand in it, and even then, she would still be without her precious code.

At present, he can think of nothing that could possibly motivate him to hand over that code.

Hannibal does not doubt she has entertained these thoughts. All things being equal, these are not solutions she can live with. Du Maurier needs to be more creative with her math. How would she do that?

She has placed another piece on the board. And this pawn is gift wrapped. A physical resemblance to Will would be enticing enough, but this psychiatrist has more than a passing interest in empathy and its psychiatric applications. He focuses on the empathic connections between humans and dogs. His dossier suggests he is capable of providing sport of the intellectual kind. The doctor must be part of her equation. He is beautiful bait. She can pursue clarity, manufacture the insight she craves, not about the doctor, but Hannibal. She knows Hannibal will be intrigued by him at the very least.

A diversion for the dinner table, perhaps. And while he dines, Du Maurier will be laughing all the way to Switzerland.

Hannibal smiles. She has figured out a way to steal his bank codes. Hannibal's mind turns restlessly with the possibilities.

His Tatiana is not the only hacker alive. Breaking through fire walls, decrypting codes, and whatever else hackers do is common place. Du Maurier is waiting for Hannibal to transfer the funds.

And what is to be done about that?

Their conversations will be much more interesting from now on. Du Maurier is correct about one thing. Hannibal is certainly intrigued. How will he thank her for being the gift that keeps on giving?

Hannibal collects his drawings, his sketch pad and his pencils, arranging them carefully in the leather case. It is similar to the silk lined case that smelled like cedar and linseed oil he used to take with him out to Will's house in Wolf Trap.

Hannibal gathers his case and leaves a generous tip for his server. He walks along Via delle Burelia deep in thought and retreats…

A Sunday afternoon in Baltimore comes to Hannibal's mind. The kitchen smells of oregano and cilantro, a stew pot sits on the stove simmering with broth, garlic, and onion. A Mozart Aria plays; a clarinet concerto he thinks.

That afternoon, it had been Will who had selected the music from Hannibal's sizable collection, not easily. After loading the cd's he had simply set the player on random, a setting Hannibal used infrequently if at all, and had leaned over the counter to pick up Hannibal's sketch pad. Will had gazed at Hannibal's finely sketched drawings of him in various poses, some imagined and one from the night before. Will had stood biting into his lower lip kneading at the tender flesh with his teeth until, feeling Hannibal's gaze, had pushed the sketch pad away.

"You're uh…very talented with figures and faces."

Will had looked at Hannibal wearing the familiar frown that was always at odds with the amusement in his eyes whenever he was presented with erotic images of himself. He had set the sketch pad upright so it leaned against the wall of the kitchen counter where they were having afternoon coffee while Hannibal worked.

Hannibal had been prepping for their evening meal, dicing vegetables to simmer in the stock. Jambalaya for Will, with Hannibal's own Andouille. Will had cocked his head to one side, his expression thoughtful.

"Have you ever drawn landscapes?" He had asked.

"Not as much as architecture, but I have attempted to capture the natural world. I'm not sure how successful I was." Hannibal had replied truthfully.

Composing landscapes had not come as naturally to him as the arrangement of buildings, the precision of architecture appealed to his sense of proportion and exactitude.

“You should come out to Wolf Trap. Bring your supplies. There’s a place less than half a mile from my house that might appeal to your aesthetics.”

“Mine? Or yours?” Hannibal had asked.

Will had turned from the sketch book to face Hannibal, had sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I would like a drawing of the place. Not a photo. I can do that. I would like you to sketch it…for me.”

The warmth that had spread across Hannibal’s face had not been from the steam billowing out of the pot, and before he had even realized he had done so, he had smiled, quite broadly. The look in Will’ eyes had been so honest and so open.

“When do you need to go back and feed the dogs?” Hannibal had said, returning his attentions to the stock and vegetables.

That drawing and many others had been confiscated by the FBI by now. Every remnant of both of their lives had been picked over, scrutinized, sifted through, and most definitely judged by now.

Suddenly Hannibal finds himself in the Piazza Santa Croce without realizing his feet have guided him there of their own volition. He looks up at Enrico Pazzi’s statue of Dante Alighieri.

Dante stands atop a pedestal, shoulders back arms wrapped in his cloak flanked by the large eagle from his *Paradiso.* Dante’s face is grim but triumphant. He survived his Inferno but Hannibal likes to think he found paradise disappointing.

God remained completely aloof, unconcerned with man’s suffering and without sympathy for his creation. The empathy of man, always at odds with the cold justice of his creator. Hannibal remembers a line from Canto XIX.

Now, who are you, to sit on the judge’s seat, a thousand miles away, with sight that sees a short span?

Hannibal wonders if Will still sits on his judge’s seat in his own Inferno.

A DANTE ALIGHIERI
L'ITALIA
M·DCCC·LXV

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Du Maurier visits her own memory palace, the one with Hannibal and she has a drink with Daniel.

The traumatized are unpredictable because they know they can survive. She did survive what he did to her. But there is not a day that passes that she does not remember how intensely pleasurable the act of killing her patient had been. Not a day goes by that she does not stifle the temptation to feel that way again.

Chapter 18

Du Maurier visits her memory palace, the one she shares with Hannibal and she has a drink with Daniel.

Du Maurier sits under the broad umbrella at the polished stone patio table by the upscale private pool in Fiesole. Her black and white Karla Colletto ensemble remains unopened in the Gucci bag at her feet.

Lydia's father had insisted on purchasing a membership for both of them once Du Maurier had explained how physical exercise was crucial to Lydia's self-esteem and recovery. Drugs, she had explained, were simply no substitute for the natural serotonin boost that came with good old fashioned exercise.

Rather than subject herself to a gym membership, Lydia had acquiesced to daddy's alternative suggestion. They had shopped for days for a swim suit that did not make her look chubby. Lydia had found one to her liking only yesterday, causing even daddy to raise his brows at the receipt.

The entire family should be in therapy, but there was not enough money on god's green earth to compensate Du Maurier for the mental anguish attached to such an onerous task. Neither was there enough alcohol.

Lydia had packed her swimsuit, but had yet to enter the bath house to put it on. Du Maurier had assured her that simply coming to the pool was progress. *Baby steps*, she had cooed to the receptive and medicated Lydia. Lydia had ordered a frozen piña colada and had rolled her large trusting eyes up at Du Maurier for approval.

Du Maurier had merely smiled at her charge and had ordered a vodka tonic with extra lime.

That had been two hours and three vodka tonics ago.

After complaining about the heat for nearly half an hour, Lydia sets her fruity drink down for the last time and excuses herself. She weaves her way to the parking lot where her driver waits in the air-conditioned town car. She will stuff her face with breath mints before the car reaches the drive to her daddy's estate, so Du Maurier is unconcerned.

She promptly texts the driver instructions to return later; after dropping off Lydia.

Her conversation with Hannibal this morning has not been far from her mind. He had seemed distracted. She had probably interrupted another of his little retreats as he had sat sketching some palazzo or fountain. Hannibal may say he wants to move on, but Du Maurier recognizes that Graham's influence on Hannibal persists even in his absence. Persists despite Hannibal's recent protestations to the contrary. His grand gesture does not persuade.

They have known each other far too long for Du Maurier not to notice the subtle but significant changes wrought by the entrance of Graham into Hannibal's awareness. The change had been nearly imperceptible at first, gradually becoming more pronounced during their last sessions, sessions that play like a broken record in her mind.

You have to maintain boundaries, Hannibal.

When the pressures of my personal and professional relationship with Will grow too great, I assure you I will find a way to relieve them.

Hannibal had a curious way of finding relief.

The pressures had grown too great the moment he had begun referring to Graham as Will.

Hannibal had not noticed how his meticulously crafted person suit had begun to unravel ever so slightly as he had sat in his chair spilling his half-truths and spinning his deceptions about his interactions with Graham. Du Maurier had recognized he was lying to himself and that had intrigued Du Maurier.

The claxons in her head had sounded so loudly she had feared Hannibal had heard them.

They had developed a rapport over the years, created their own euphemisms and coded language to express vagaries that passed for substance that passed for therapy. After her attack, their pantomime had sufficed. Hannibal had refused to accept her retirement and she knew better than to try and convince him otherwise. Occasionally, Hannibal did take what he needed from their sessions. He had kept coming back. And so, their polite truce had become comfortable, even enjoyable.

Until Hannibal had met Will Graham. Jack Crawford had unwittingly opened a Pandora's Box by pairing the two of them together. Graham had been desperately but successfully denying his nature and Crawford had sent him into the lion's den. Whether Graham had pulled the thorn from the lion's paw or become the thorn did not matter to Du Maurier. The lion had felt the thorn. He feels it still.

Du Maurier had seen the writing on the wall. Seeing Graham in his cell at BSHCI had confirmed her worst fears. He was every bit as damaged and dangerous as only Hannibal's brilliance could manage and he was as beautiful as he was broken. Du Maurier had known the young profiler would not stop until he had his retribution, had satisfied his need for vengeance or die trying.

Offering her support, confirming for him what he had wanted to believe, had been painfully easy. What had transpired after that, Du Maurier had pieced together from newspapers, from conversations with Crawford and Graham at FBI Headquarters; and from whatever vagaries Hannibal had seen fit to throw her way.

Crawford had known Graham was in trouble, had known he was drowning. Crawford had searched for her and she had allowed him to find her. She had kept him busy, chewing up time and resources, keeping him away from his sick wife so the guilt would eat away at him like acid until he could take no more. He had acted rashly, impatient to end the stand-off with Hannibal, unable to wait for Graham any longer. She had stroked Crawford's doubt until it had erupted. But, the cavalry had not come.

And all hell had broken loose.

Du Maurier rattles her drink, tosses her head back to ease the tension in her neck that always accompanies thoughts of the debacle in Baltimore. She had warned Hannibal. He had refused to listen. She had left him to Graham. They deserved each other. She had hoped that Hannibal would be forced to kill Graham, and then they would both be free of him.

She had left him coldly that afternoon in his Baltimore office as the gray light of winter had seeped through the grand windows. She had presented her terms cloaked in professional courtesy. That she had invaded his space, his domain, to deliver her terms had underscored her determination and her disappointment. That visit to his office had been her first, and her last.

I am no longer your therapist.

May I ask why?

I have reached the limit of my efficacy. I don't believe I can help you.

Are you giving me a referral?

No…

She had made it clear to Hannibal that their relationship as he had come to know it would now be defined on her terms, not his.

I am simply ending our patient client relationship.

You tried to end it before.

I am grateful for your persistence in engaging me after my attack. However, in light of everything that has happened with Will Graham, I have begun to question your actions, particularly your past actions with regards to me and my attack…

She had also made it clear that Hannibal's motives, whatever they were, were unacceptable. The mention of her attack had been pointed. He had now crossed the line, again. She was withdrawing from the board. It was now up to Hannibal to clear the board. Unless and until he did so, the only thing he could count on was her silence.

…the conclusion that I've drawn is that you are dangerous.

Dangerous to himself, and by extension – to her. Like a parent scolding a child, Du Maurier had been forced to smack Hannibal's greedy hands and stick him in the corner. And he had been unable to resist hurling one last barb on her way out.

I'm resuming Will Graham's therapy.

To what end? Besides your own.

He asked for my help.

Then maybe you deserve each other.

Stubborn to the last.

She had trembled all the way to her car.

She had already made her arrangements to leave weeks before delivering her ultimatum.

Hannibal would have wanted her code and he would have tried to extract it from her. He might even have killed her if she had refused and she had not been certain she could match wits with Hannibal should he ever remove his person suit completely as he most certainly would have done.

Cooler heads had prevailed. Hannibal had received her message in a bottle. The fragrance was specific and she had known Hannibal would know where to look for her once he had returned to his senses and donned his suit once again.

She had not known about the girl. She had not known what Hannibal had planned. She would have tried to dissuade him from his flights of fancy. He would not have listened. A useless conversation avoided.

Once she had realized that Graham was truly innocent of all the murders he had been accused of, she had believed Hannibal had killed the Hobbs' girl as well.

She wonders if she might have been invited to join their little enclave at some point, a female presence for the girl.

Du Maurier tuts and shakes her head. It is more likely Hannibal would have disappeared with his little family, after she had helped secure their escape. Although, she would have relished the look on Graham's face had they made it that far.

Flights of fancy from Hannibal. The very idea had been doomed from the start. Whimsy.

He will be caught someday, but not while he has that code.

She takes another swallow of the watery vodka, savoring the bite of citrus as it slides down her throat.

After managing to escape Baltimore, he had caught a flight from Philadelphia to Paris; and she had joined him there having been released on Crawford's tenuous authority, a decision likely under review by now. They had flown first class on Air France to Switzerland together. After updating their account at Banque Suisse, and making a withdrawal, they had flown to Italy. The da Vinci airport had never looked a more welcomed sight.

By then, they had read about the FBI and its sensational failure in headlines from New York to Miami. Not even a month later, the stories had stopped. Hannibal had remained stoic and seemingly unmoved those first few months. Gradually, he had come out of his waking stupor and had donned the familiar person suit with which Du Maurier was accustomed. Things seemed normal once again. Almost.

She had known Graham had wounded Hannibal, but she had not realized how deeply. Whatever Hannibal had done to Graham had contaminated Hannibal in the process. Hannibal had not been the same since Graham was incarcerated. She had left that Hannibal. The Hannibal who had joined her in Paris had almost been a stranger.

Politely withdrawn. A ghost of his former self.

Since arriving in Italy, she has witnessed the same emotional distance, the same affectation of cordiality while pretending to be engaged. Hannibal performs his social somersaults quite well, but she knows his mind is somewhere else, strolling through his memory palace. And he sketches constantly.

She had begun to doubt his motives concerning Graham while Graham had been locked up and the change in Hannibal had frightened her. If Hannibal was no longer predictable, if his actions and choices no longer made sense, even to her, she could not risk the exposure should he finally make a mistake.

Graham had mistake painted all over him in tall toxic Technicolor. And yet, Hannibal had been drawn like a moth to the flame. First the madness and then the man. Those wide blue eyes and that angelic face had masked a killer as ruthless as Hannibal. Hannibal had been unable to resist what he seen lurking in that ocean of blue. Curiosity had become obsession.

Graham was not the first patient to arouse Hannibal's curiosity nor was he the first to succumb to Hannibal's influence. There had been many over the course of Hannibal's professional career. Hannibal would make a clinical diagnosis, decide on a course of treatment, and implement that treatment with a terrifyingly inhuman detachment she had found so alluring, so inspiring all those years ago.

His curiosity had been pure, unblemished, freed of guilt. He had demonstrated near perfect objectivity. He had been beautiful, a god among mortals.

Hannibal had never intervened past a certain point in the therapy. Had Hannibal not destroyed his patients' records and files, the FBI would have found among all Hannibal's successes, a disproportionately large number of suicides, arrests, and referrals to psychiatric hospitals. One could argue that the number of patients who presented as highly volatile and deeply disturbed was also disproportionately large.

Hannibal had never visited any of them once they had left or been otherwise removed from his practice. Not even in a consulting capacity. He preferred to interact from afar, through correspondence or newspapers as though listening to prayers and confessions while dispensing absolution.

Until Will Graham had managed to crawl through the stitches in Hannibal's suit and burrow under Hannibal's skin. She has never seen Hannibal pine like this, and pining is exactly what it is. Hannibal wants what he cannot have. As long as Graham lives, Hannibal will be consumed by him, in one way or another.

She almost feels sorry for Graham.

She had not believed Graham talented enough to deceive Hannibal so completely. His empathy and his particular madness had certainly mesmerized Hannibal. Graham was much stronger than she had given him credit for.

Whose friendship are you considering?

…We've discussed him before.

Will Graham.

Oddly enough, he's nothing like me. We see the world in different ways, yet he can assume my point of view.

By profiling the criminally insane.

As good a demonstration as any. I find it reassuring.

Reassuring did not begin to describe what he had felt. Hannibal had found it incredibly seductive. And dangerous. To allow Graham, an FBI profiler uniquely capable of entering Hannibal's mind had been reckless. Hannibal had allowed himself to be seduced by the mystery of Graham's mind and, it would seem, the rest of him.

For a long time, she had been the only one able to look at him unflinchingly. And remain. Alive.

She remembers when they first met as she stirs her nearly empty drink. Hannibal was handsome, educated, and impossibly charming when he chose to be. They had respected each other's work and sensibilities. They shared the same tastes and interests. They traveled in the same social circle.

They became lovers immediately. The first time, at a professional seminar out of town. Then a weekend in Mystic Seaport. Another weekend in Boston. The sex had been…to die for. He had very nearly asphyxiated her on a couple of occasions. Du Maurier rolls a chunk of ice around her tongue, feels the familiar tickle between her legs, growing warmer despite the ice she crunches between her teeth.

Hannibal had found a kindred spirit in her. And she had found him likewise a kindred spirit.

Gradually, they began to consult with one another, professionally. Upon comparing notes about two of their patients, both with similar issues, they had found they had employed the same therapy and with similar results. It had taken scarcely a look between them to realize they shared the same… professional curiosity.

They became colleagues in a highly unconventional corner of psychiatry. They had even shared a practice for a time. They had experienced a meeting of minds that had left Du Maurier breathless, anticipating a very rewarding partnership. The possibilities could have been endless.

Du Maurier used to cook with Hannibal. He liked performing for an audience. Du Maurier had enjoyed watching him create in his element. Hannibal exuded a raw sexuality in his kitchen. She had watched him move about his domain with elegance, wielding spatula and cleaver with ease. The food always beautiful and decadent; whetting the appetite for the sensual delights that awaited, upstairs.

Though du Maurier had joined him at the table, she had refused to bring the meat. Hannibal had pressed the issue, but his efforts to persuade had been quietly rebuffed, Du Maurier had demurred preferring instead to supply the wine. Hannibal had tried a more direct approach.

Hannibal had wound up one of his patients, good and tight, and referred him to her.

It had taken him only two sessions to fall apart. As small as she was, she had been highly motivated. It is apparently possible to remove a tongue with a letter opener. It is also possible to make a man swallow his own tongue and choke on it while vomiting. It is, in fact, much easier than one would think.

Du Maurier wonders still what Hannibal would have done had she been unsuccessful. They had the joint account by that time. They had a very lucrative practice and a very savvy accountant. Their broker had been especially aggressive and effective, at least until he found his way to Hannibal's table, and not by invitation.

The traumatized are unpredictable because they know they can survive. She did survive what he did to her. But there is not a day that passes that she does not remember how intensely pleasurable the act of killing her patient had been. Not a day goes by that she does not stifle the temptation to feel that way again.

She had closed her practice. Patients had become dangerous. To her.

She had not stepped foot in Hannibal's kitchen, nor sat at his table since. Until Florence. And yet, she does not dine with him alone.

She knows who Hannibal thinks of as he sits across from her at the table. She knows who Hannibal thinks of when he makes love to her. She knows and Hannibal knows that she knows. Hannibal wants her to know.

Will Graham is now a part of her existence. Hannibal should have killed him. She still cannot understand why he did not. But she is beginning to. He is also a survivor.

Hannibal has given her plenty of platitudes and has effectively talked around his true feelings for a year. It is clear to Du Maurier that Hannibal cannot or will not accept that Graham is not his friend and he never was.

If Graham did not hate Hannibal before being gutted, then he most certainly does now. That Hannibal mourns for what has been lost is expected. As a psychiatrist himself, Hannibal understands the grieving process. Graham's betrayal and masterful performance should be enough to convince Hannibal of the error of his ways.

There is a point where stubbornness becomes delusion. Had Graham been so convincing that even in betrayal, Hannibal believed? How much had been performance, and how much had been genuine, she cannot know. Hannibal had left Graham dying, but not dead. He had left Graham with yet another choice. Another chance.

Delusion? Or…patience?

Hannibal has yet to transfer the deed and stock to his attorney's account. While it is possible that he waits for all the legalities to be finalized, Du Maurier remains cautious. One can never be too careful where Hannibal is concerned. It is also likely that Graham has no attorney to contact.

Du Maurier sighs as she stirs her drink. That would be typical of Hannibal. He sometimes did not consider the world spins on its own axis, not his. She can imagine the drawn lips and narrowed eyes as Hannibal was told his grand gesture was not possible due to some legal snafu.

Hannibal would arrange for an attorney for Graham himself if he had to. He must know that Graham would never accept his gift. Then again, Hannibal often surprises Du Maurier. He is in some ways very much like a child, confused by the behaviors of grown-ups.

He will make the withdrawal sooner or later. Whatever he has planned, whether to leave Graham a parting gift or to present him with a hoped for homecoming, he will have to do something for appearances. Timing is crucial.

When Hannibal enters his code she will have her window to claim the rest. She can only do it once. She cannot lock Hannibal out by changing her codes afterward. Changing codes must be done in person. Hannibal will no doubt conclude the remainder to be in the Cayman Islands, but by the time he does, she will have personally dispersed their holdings into manageable portfolios, spread among the continents.

In the meantime, she has distractions to occupy her.

Du Maurier turns her attentions to the pool and the sun bathed bodies splashing in it or sprawled beside it in the lounge chairs that line its perimeter. She watches the dark haired young man in the cobalt blue swim trunks lift himself out of the pool and walk dripping wet over to his chair.

Clayton is gorgeous. Just watching him breathe is glorious. He grabs his towel and begins to rub his neck, then chest. Du Maurier thinks she would like to be that towel right now. A giggle threatens and she stares at the drink in her hand.

Du Maurier sets her vodka tonic on the patio table and stands up to comport herself. Her coral colored sundress, another Dolce original, is cut low in front and back to allow maximum exposure, but she has kept to the shade this afternoon as she has waited for Dr. Clayton to finish his dip in the pool and recline in the lounge chair to dry off in the sun.

She adjusts her sun hat and walks purposefully over to where he rests comfortably still wearing only his trunks. He is lean and sleek, save for the downy hair on bronzed forearms, calves, and the swirl of fine hair around his navel extending down into the wet trunks. Du Maurier admires the physique for a moment since he is not this stripped down at the gym.

He is engrossed in an issue of Scientific American, his feet move restlessly in time to the music he listens to. He is playing it loud enough that Du Maurier can hear the faint thudding of the bass and drums. He is reading the current issue of the vaunted magazine and Du Maurier decides to gage his vanity.

She brushes a finger over his toes. He looks up from his magazine with a start, pulls one earbud loose and gives Du Maurier the once over. A curious smile emerges as he lifts a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

"Ah, Dr. Clayton. We meet again. Has another of your articles been published?" Du Maurier says her chosen accent clipped and posh.

"Excuse me?" Daniel says, squinting at the petite blonde looming over the foot of his lounge chair. She seems a bit overdressed for a pool. He notes the jewelry alone costs as much as Maria's salary. Her annual salary. He sits up a little straighter. He shuts off the music.

"You are the Dr. Clayton who writes about dogs and humans? I enjoyed your article last year; an extract from your paper wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. I'm sorry, have we met?"

"You don't remember me?" Du Maurier watches him shake his head as he tries to remember an encounter that never happened.

"Refresh my memory. Where did we meet?" he asks, shifting his legs slightly, a nervous response to her deliberate scrutiny.

She makes no effort to put him at ease. His reaction will reveal many things to her, among them his interest in her. She can only describe his behavior at the gym as cordial. He keeps to himself, but then again, most everyone does. So, she is pleased when he raises his arms over his head to let his hands rest between lounge chair and his head. His gaze is direct though he still squints in the bright sunlight.

"The symposium in London two years ago, shortly after your paper was published. *The Evolutionary Empathy between Canines and Humans* I believe. You spoke briefly on it. Too briefly actually. I found your lecture most refreshing." She adjusts her sunglasses.

"If I remember, the other speakers were a little dry…" He says.

Du Maurier would not know but nods her head in agreement anyway. Perusing through copies of all the papers delivered at the symposium had been tedious and she could only assume the authors themselves had been equally as tedious. She has been to her fair share of seminars and symposiums.

"And older." Du Maurier says without a trace of humor. A tick of a smile passes over Clayton's lips, but nothing more.

He breathes in the humid air, exhales slowly as he continues to gaze at Du Maurier. She smiles indulgently as she waits for him to engage her or return to his magazine.

He folds the corner of the page he was reading, a dog ear flap to mark his place. He closes the magazine and tosses it aside. "You seem to know me, but I do not recall meeting you. And I am pretty good with faces, usually."

Daniel is very good with faces and he is having trouble placing hers. His instincts tell him he did not meet her at any symposium, his empathy tells him she is not being entirely truthful with him - about what he could not say. His memory is not infallible, but his empathy is. His instincts have yet to fail him.

She stands in front of him, lovely and self-composed, perhaps too self-composed and this is what has Daniel's empathy tingling like a rusted bell twisting in the wind. She does not ring true to him.

“Dr. Francesca Dumont.” She says, “Pleased to meet you, again.” She removes her sunglasses and smiles down at him. Easy enough to smile at him as he sits with tousled, wet hair and long lashes looking more like Graham every minute.

“I’ll try to remember this time. You do look familiar, but not from the symposium.” He says, a slight frown gracing his otherwise exquisite face. Du Maurier imagines he is no doubt taking in the designer sundress, the Armani sandals, and enough solid gold jewelry to attest to expensive taste and the bank account to flaunt it.

She is a bit put off he does not seem to remember her from the gym. Curious, that. He was focused when he worked out, but she had not believed so focused that he did not take note of the people around him. There were plenty of fit and attractive people there, and she had run on a treadmill right next to him just last week.

“We go to the same gym, here in Fiesole. I thought I recognized you, but the gym didn’t really seem the proper venue for introductions.” She responds, careful to maintain the swank London accent she adopts for Dumont's persona.

“Yes! I *have* seen you at the gym. You could have said something there. I wouldn’t have minded. Do you live in Fiesole?”

The duality of her nags at him, jagged and harsh like a crust of bread he can’t quite swallow. Outwardly, she presents as what she appears, a doctor, like himself. She is very pretty with her long blonde tresses, luminous blue eyes, and lips that seem set in a perpetual pucker. Although diminutive in stature she is fit and curvy in all the right places. The dress is both tasteful and form fitting. And, he notes with mild amusement, she is formal and stiff - typically British.

And then there are the other qualities he notices. Her movements are languid and calculating, everything about her seems calculated. Her mannerisms are as manicured as her nails. She seems warm and friendly, on the outside, but inside, she is quite cold.

He does notice the crease of her smile widen at hearing he recognizes her. He feels her satisfaction, and it feels like victory to her. Actually, Daniel thinks it closer to conceit. He decides he does not like her, not even a little.

“No. I see a patient here. I use the gym when I visit.” She says inhaling deeply so that her breasts swell in the sundress, revealing a glimpse of her pale soft skin.

Daniel’s eyes do not linger. The gesture seems innocent enough, but Daniel knows it is not. Nothing she has done has been overt or improper and yet he can almost inhale a subtle insincerity about her. She is like wine too long in the bottle.

She calibrates her emotions; they do not flow naturally. He finds her confusing.

“Is your patient the reason for your visit today?”

Daniel is beginning to wonder how long she had been gazing at him. However long it had been it had clearly not been long enough to satisfy her. She is undressing him with her eyes and he is not wearing much as it is.

"Yes, she left a few minutes ago…" Du Maurier gestures toward her table. "I noticed you here by the pool and decided to say hello. It is such a lovely afternoon I wasn't quite ready to leave."

Du Maurier smiles. "I left my bag and my drink…" She waits for him to invite her to join him. Perhaps even offer to walk her back to retrieve her things.

Daniel does not bite. He merely continues to squint. He raises a hand to shield his eyes as he stares up at her. His hand also serves as a buffer. He can play this game too. And better.

He would like to know why she walked over to him. Unless she plans on doing him right here, he thinks wryly. Of course, Doctor Dumont has no idea her emotions are so transparent that her desires cling to him like sweat.

Du Maurier glances around absently, acting surprised suddenly at her brashness. She purses her lips as if realizing she has been far too forward. "I'm sorry if I have ambushed you here…it was thoughtless of me to intrude."

Daniel almost calls her on that one. That was an outright lie. He is feeling like he has been stalked by a lioness in a pretty dress. He doesn't mind assertive women, prefers them. Usually, they prove just as assertive in the sack. Daniel cannot decide if she is being coy, or experimental. It's almost as if she is trying to gage his responses to various stimuli.

Daniel realizes he is a little stimulated.

She observes Clayton glance down at himself, his skin is dry, but his swim trunks still cling to his body, the contours of his physique in full relief against the wet fabric. The distinctive bulge between his legs draws her gaze. Very little is left to the imagination. He glances at his towel, but lifts his eyes to meet Du Maurier's.

He leans forward, sits up straight and swings his legs over the side of the lounge chair so that he no longer faces her. Usually, attention from women is welcome, but not this one.

"What compelled you to intrude, Dr. Dumont?" he asks over his shoulder, body in profile, arms resting on thighs. Du Maurier is shocked he doesn't even invite her to have a seat in one of the numerous empty chairs.

"I was hoping to persuade you to join me for a drink at my table." She says as she allows her fingers to slide along the frames of the sunglasses. Imagines sliding them along something else…

"Your table is on the patio, under an umbrella. I came here for the pool and the sun." He says, stretching his arms and back, basking in the warmth of the hot summer sun. He hopes she takes the hint. He thinks he should be leaving soon anyway. Will is coming over for dinner…

"It would appear you can afford a respite from the sun."

He laughs a little, "Well, you know what they say; you can never be too tan or too thin." He makes a point of appraising her slim figure.

"I believe the saying is you cannot be too rich or too thin."

Clayton raises his eyebrows at the barb, but reaches for his towel and rubs at his head. He hums softly, “What conversation could possibly lure me into the shade, Dr. Dumont?”

“Actually, I was hoping to confer with you about a professional matter. You pair your patients with dogs from local shelters?” A nod from Clayton. “And you currently have patients engaged in this therapy?”

“I don’t discuss my patients…”

“I wouldn’t be inquiring about your patients rather I would like to confer with you about one of mine. I am investigating alternative therapy for her and since you have some expertise and success in that area, I was hoping to explore the possibilities.”

“I have no objection to that. Although,” he pauses to wipe away the water that trails from his head onto his neck, “I wasn’t planning on talking shop today.”

Given his attitude, Du Maurier wonders if he talks shop any day.

“If there’s nowhere you have to be, I don’t think our conversation would take longer than the time it takes to finish one drink. Won’t you join me?”

“Well, I am meeting a friend later…”

He is surprisingly resistant and uncharacteristically reluctant to discuss his own methods with her. Du Maurier is not accustomed to such a guarded response from a professional colleague. Usually, the opportunity to brag is embraced rather than avoided.

“Then, may I contact you at your office? I should have done that rather than approach you here. But I saw you just before she left and since she is recovering from a suicide attempt, my feet moved more quickly than my manners.”

Daniel sighs, a soft sound to accompany the subtle swell in his green eyes. “Well, since we are both here, I have time for just one. What are we drinking?”

“Vodka tonic.” Du Maurier says, quite pleased with herself. Getting him to agree to one drink has been like pulling teeth. Perhaps later…

“Make mine gin.” He leans over to grab his clothes from beneath the lounge chair. He quickly dons a faded T-shirt and pulls a pair of Nike athletic shorts over his trunks, slips a pair of leather sandals on his feet.

He gestures toward the patio. “After you.” He scoops up his towel, watch, and wallet.

Daniel feels the tug to leave like tendrils around his legs but the mention of suicide gives him pause. One drink can’t possibly take too long. Doctor Dumont had a legitimate reason to stalk him after all. He wonders why she couldn’t have made that plain in the first place.

Of course, she wanted to test the water first. He hopes it was sufficiently cold.

Once they are seated with their drinks, Clayton leans forward in his chair, rests his elbows on the table. “I should have recognized you from the gym, but I don’t wear my glasses to the pool.”

“You don’t wear contacts?”

“Don’t like them. Glasses are easier.”

“Near sighted?”

“Bifocals actually, but distance is especially bad.

“You don’t wear them to the gym either.” Neither does he wear them when he walks his dogs but Du Maurier doesn’t mention that.

“The glasses slip off my nose constantly, so I just wear them to work. But, I see you clearly now and those workouts are paying off.”

Du Maurier lowers her eyes and smiles. His tone is not flirty. He has offered a polite compliment to put her at ease, but she reads the caution in his eyes. She assumes this will be the first and last compliment she receives from him.

Daniel is no longer confused about what he feels from her. She has not been calibrating her emotions, she has been fabricating them. He cannot completely empathize with her because she really has no emotions to empathize with except one. She wants…something.

Something besides sex. The sexual attraction to him is real, but secondary. He feels want from her, longing, something like…anticipation. He decides he is still confused.

She begins to describe Lydia and her relevant issues to Daniel. He listens and nods. He makes an effort to drink his gin and tonic slowly, keeping pace with Dumont so she does not notice that he wants something, too. He wants to leave. He wants to leave in the worst way.

It is clear to Du Maurier that he does not intend to linger once his drink is finished. She would appear desperate if she invited him to join her for dinner. She doubts he would accept any invitation. She decides to let him off her hook for now.

She has already slipped his watch from the folds of the towel. It rests in her lap buried within the creases of her dress. The watch will function as an excuse to engage him again, perhaps outside of the gym or this pool, should he decline to consult with her about Lydia.

“Well, I will explore the possibilities with my patient our next session. May I refer my patient to you should she agree to the therapy?” She rattles the ice in her empty glass, watches the green sliver of lime settle to the bottom.

“Of course. I would recommend a joint session. She would remain your patient. I am only providing an assist.” He checks his wrist, then towel and blinks several times. “I’m sorry.” He says, obviously annoyed. “I have to get going…”

He thanks Du Maurier for the drink and extends again his sincere offer to assist in Lydia’s therapy, complimentary, of course. He wastes no time walking back to his chair and retrieving the rest of his belongings. Du Maurier watches him walk to the parking lot.

She knows the drive to his home is not far. She could follow on foot. Whomever he is meeting is clearly much more interesting than she is.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal returns to his memory palace. He can't seem to help himself.
>
> “Will, this is new for you, in many respects. Any thoughts on that? I ask out of concern for you.”
> “Concern? For me?” Will raises his eyebrows in mock surprise.
> Hannibal cocks his head, resumes fingering Will’s curls. “This was your first time with a man?”
> “There’s that. Mostly, there is the concern that I’ve been intimate with you – the object of my afflictions.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19

Hannibal continues to retreat to his memory palace. He can’t seem to help himself.

Hannibal carefully sets the case of Bianco Toscana from Fiesole on the floor next to his climate controlled storeroom. He had just pulled into the long driveway that ascends to his villa when the van had pulled up behind him. Hannibal had waited in his Jaguar peering into his rearview mirror until he had been satisfied it was the wine delivery that Du Maurier had promised.

Hannibal does not like white vans. He does not like them in his driveway. He has good reason to view nondescript white vans with disdain and plenty of suspicion.

He had greeted the driver with his usual visage of decorum, and conversed pleasantly with him in faultless Italian as he had guided him to the kitchen. He had summarily dismissed him with a sizable tip and sent him on his way, activating the electronic gate and security system once the van had cleared the perimeter.

He had gone upstairs and changed his clothes, prepared to spend the rest of the afternoon in his kitchen. The kitchen is spacious, allowing plenty of movement, its dimensions perfectly attuned to the needs of one so versed in the culinary arts as Hannibal. Hannibal especially likes the Italian tiles that surround the walls and the tiled floor, laid in the style of ancient Roman tesserae including a drain off center, so that Hannibal can easily clean the floor with a hose and a squeegee.

Chopin’s Nocturne in B major plays softly as Hannibal selects the ingredients from his stainless steel refrigerator. He remembers playing this piece on Will’s piano, although Will had not been home at the time. His lips pucker at the thought he never got around to playing it for him.

He notices the wine stills sits in the doorway. He had left it there in his eagerness to peel off the damp clothes from the walk this morning in the city. Florence will be sweltering by this time of day. He thinks fleetingly of Clayton, how his movements and gestures are so like Will’s.

Hannibal decides it would be unwise to subject himself to the young man's company. To engage him in even a brief conversation would be tortuous. It is not his fault he looks like Will. Better to leave him alone, or leave him to Du Maurier.

Hannibal lifts the case of wine and carries it into his storeroom. Hannibal thinks he will frustrate Du Maurier, tease her into playing her hand by refusing to cooperate. He will not accept her invitation when it comes. He will watch and observe instead. From a discreet distance. He will make her wait.

Hannibal emerges from the storeroom, white apron wrapped securely about his trim waist. He carries a bottle of the Toscana Bianco with him and sets it in the wine cooler so he can enjoy it with his evening meal. He remembers the flavor and has been looking forward to more.

Perhaps he will have a soak in the hot tub later. Hannibal's lips curl slightly as he returns to the counter to resume his afternoon preparations.

He prefers red wines, especially those with hints of berries and pepper with tannins tamed and velvety so that the wine feels like liquid silk slipping down his throat. White wines should clear the palette in a cascade crisp enough to clean yet mellow enough to linger on the tongue.

Bianco blends should be pleasantly crisp. The Vermentino grape, originally from Spain, grows well in the Tuscan soil and yields a grape that, when aged properly as this harvest was, produces light fruity tones with a slightly earthy finish from the soil. The bianco from Fiesole blends the Vermentino with Chardonnay.

Hannibal is impressed. The bianco he drank at Du Maurier's home had notes of sweet basil and pine nut, quite unique on the palate. This winery in Fiesole has harnessed the most pleasing qualities of this particular grape most expertly.

Hannibal has paired the pale golden hued wine with a fresh salad tossed lightly in balsamic vinegar and virgin olive oil and a pesto fettuccini topped with his own fennel flavored Italian sausage. The sausage is browning now. The aroma fills the entire villa.

He opens the doors to the porch wide and glances at his garden of herbs, tomatoes, and assorted peppers. He pours another generous glass of the other wine in the case, the Toscana Rosso, a Sangiovese blend, apparently the signature blend of the vineyard.

The owner did not waste the opportunity to advertise and Hannibal will likely become a regular customer. The red is excellent. He can taste the dark ripe hints of berries and the tang of dew soaked soil on his tongue. He swallows again and is certain he detects a certain tartness that suggests the grapes grew close to an olive orchard. And it is smooth, so very smooth going down.

He is reminded of an impromptu wine tasting with Will. Of course he thinks of Will. He cannot stop thinking of Will. Hannibal sets down the glass upon the marble counter. His eyes glance about the kitchen as he compulsively compares it with the one he left behind.

The wine tasting had followed on the heels of the celebratory dinner he had shared with Will after they had left a perturbed Jack Crawford at the crime scene of Randall Tier. Jack had had plenty of reason to be perturbed. He had been sour and testy by the time Hannibal and Will had arrived.

Jack had likely ground the fillings in his teeth while pacing the floors. Jack had actually glowered at Hannibal when he had arrived, Will in tow several minutes later. He and Will had not been especially prompt about showing up at the museum. They had made Uncle Jack wait.

Hannibal remembers that morning vividly. He had not slept after Will had fallen asleep beside him. Too many thoughts had run around his head as he had processed the events of their evening, adrenaline still pumping through him though his body had been at rest. Hannibal had been too enraptured, too fascinated to sleep.

He had refrained from turning on the stereo before. Somehow, once he had found himself completely alone with Will in his bedroom, the prearranged selections had seemed too contrived. In hindsight, Will had not needed the distraction anyway.

Hannibal had turned on the music later, after Will had fallen asleep, to play while he slept. Hannibal had played soothing piano quartets, Mozart of course. He had imagined Will would hear the gentle notes playing distantly in the recesses of wherever his mind had taken him in its slumber.

Will had been far more at ease than Hannibal had thought him capable, at least for an initial encounter. The act of killing Tier had summoned Will's demon and Will had let it loose much to Hannibal's delight. Will had needed to lose the control that was strangling him. There would be time to cultivate their newfound intimacy with all the nuance and sensitivity it deserved.

To finally possess him mind and body, to taste, to smell, to touch him alive and warm, responsive to Hannibal's attentions and sharing in his desires had been more than enough. Will had let go completely, just as Hannibal had wanted. In fact, Will had behaved nearly exactly as Hannibal had wanted. Will had used his imagination to please Hannibal.

Of course Will could do that. But Hannibal had wanted to *see* Will and he is not sure that he did. It is possible Will's actions and responses were his own. It is also possible what Hannibal experienced with him was a combination. Will was unique. Unpredictable. He supposed there could be no other way with Will.

Will had also demonstrated an urgency that Hannibal had interpreted as haste. *That* was all Will. Will had wanted to experience, to feel; not think. Hannibal had understood.

As delighted as Hannibal had been he had also been aware of the emotional stress Will had wrestled with the entire time. Many times Will's hands had wandered to Hannibal's throat, and each time he had pulled back, his fingers tight in a fist until he uncurled them in Hannibal's hair, twisting ash blonde locks instead.

Hannibal had given plenty of thought to that. Violence and intimacy running in circles around Will's head, all night.

Hannibal had witnessed many emotions sweep across Will's face in a blur of silken curls and smooth flesh. There had been, however, too many feelings to catalog, too much pleasure to be savored in the moment for Hannibal to analyze the assortment of reactions Will was having at the time. Hannibal's senses had been saturated with Will.

As for Will, Will had not so much as fallen asleep as collapsed.

Will's body and mind had succumbed to exhaustion. Defending himself and his home against Tier had been exhausting enough, but he had been high on adrenaline. He had spent the rest of the night and the entirety of the following day making his monument with Hannibal, stealing into the museum to arrange his masterpiece, and had spent all of last evening wrapped around Hannibal in some fashion or other. He had barely eaten anything either.

Hannibal had known he had it in him.

Hannibal had felt the pleasant warmth of satisfaction grow within as he had gazed upon Will in his slumber. Lips parted as each breath passed quietly into the pillows. Will had barely moved all night. No nightmares to follow him out of his dreams.

Whatever dreams had manifested in Will's subconscious, he had not awakened shaking disoriented and in a cold sweat.

Will had at last become intimate with his instincts.

Hannibal still does not know what Will dreamed about that night. Hannibal had not asked that of him and Will had never told him.

Hannibal had noted Will had slept for nearly seven hours. Seven hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Dawn had come and gone. The winter sun had risen over a bleary monochromatic sky. Stark light had streamed over the bed as Hannibal had opened the curtains just enough to brighten. He had already slipped downstairs earlier, prepared a breakfast and put on coffee. Hannibal had returned upstairs to slip silently back between the sweet-scented sheets and blankets. He had not wanted to miss Will waking up in his bed.

That would be like expecting a child to forgo Christmas.

Hannibal removes the sausage from the hot stove before it grows too crisp. He sips at his wine and allows his mind to remove him from Florence, from this tiled kitchen so far from Baltimore. His mind replaces the aromas of meat, fennel and pesto with musk and sandalwood and fresh coffee.

He is back in his bedroom in Baltimore with Will…

Will stirs in the bed, blankets gathered at his waist. His back faces Hannibal but Hannibal can imagine the frown as Will shudders against the chill tickling his shoulders. He turns over quickly, eyes wide with the knowledge he is not in Wolf Trap. His mouth turns up, a hint of a smile as he gazes at Hannibal. He groans and stretches, cracking his back and positions himself on his side, facing Hannibal.

His eyes are still heavy with sleep but Hannibal knows his mind is already at work, thoughts and images assaulting him before he is even fully awake. Will grabs at the blankets, pulls them up to cover his shoulders, seeking an anchor to steady him.

Hannibal understands. Will usually wakes up alone.

"How did you sleep?" Hannibal asks reaching out a hand to touch the soft curls.

Will shakes his head free of Hannibal's fingers. "You know exactly how I slept. You probably watched me."

Barely awake and already challenge in his eyes.

“Will, this is new for you, in many respects. Any thoughts on that? I ask out of concern for you.”

“Concern? For me?” Will raises his eyebrows in mock surprise.

Hannibal cocks his head, resumes fingering Will’s curls. “This was your first time with a man?”

“There’s that. Mostly, there is the *concern* that I’ve been intimate with *you* – the object of my afflictions.”

So infuriating, his Will.

Hannibal takes Will’s face in his hands. “You felt both of us, didn’t you? Felt my embraces, my body as fully as you felt your own?” Hannibal asks, preferring directness this morning of firsts.

A slight nod from Will. He stops pulling away, looks at Hannibal from beneath a fringe of lashes in the grey light. He really looks at Hannibal this time, carefully.

“The entire time?” Hannibal asks.

Another nod. Hannibal holds Will in his gaze knowing Will wants to look away. Will’s brows furrow as he gazes back.

“You become as lost in intimacy as you do in the minds of killers. No wonder you avoid it.” Hannibal pauses, “You can’t control your empathy…even in bed.”

Will’s eyes flick away, embarrassed. His face flushes hot. Hannibal lets go of his face, smoothing his hair behind his ears.

“You were overwhelmed last night.”

Will flinches, but Hannibal realizes he flinches at the words. Hannibal slides his fingers along Will’s jaw, caresses the wisps of beard on the face he loves so much. The familiar gesture calms him. Somewhat.

This time, Will’s values and decency were present and shocked by his own associations and behavior. Hannibal knows this is difficult for Will. To allow Hannibal this glimpse into his mind is intimate indeed.

Will angles his head so he can look into Hannibal’s face as Hannibal’s fingers stroke at his lips, a gentle invitation to spill his secrets. The yielding of soft flesh against his fingertips causes Hannibal’s breath to hitch in anticipation. Will’s eyes are clear and unguarded, Hannibal can see himself in them they are so blue and clear.

“With us…it was…” Will whispers into Hannibal’s fingers. “…almost too much. I can’t help it. It just happens.”

“I imagine that could become disorienting for the other person if they didn’t know what to expect.”

Will pulls back a little, wets his lips in thought.

“You had to know. Everything about me fascinates you.” Will says.

“I did not *know,* but I…hoped.”

A quiet snicker from Will. “Of course, you would.”

“When you kill the pleasure is singular. You feel only your own pleasure with perfect clarity and self-awareness. When you make love, the pleasure is no longer singular.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“The emotions of your partner drive your own pleasure, your passions. If you climax the same time as your partner…” Hannibal stops. His lips wrinkle before he can control himself.

“Envious…Doctor?”

“Intrigued.”

Hannibal tugs on Will’s hair. Will allows it. He allows Hannibal to spread his fingers through his tangle of curls and pull him close. He allows Hannibal to cover his mouth, bite the flesh of his lower lip, and push him into the mattress. Hannibal feels the pads of Will’s fingers skim over his cheeks, his throat. The fingers linger on his jugular and press softly against the pulse of blood that quickens at the touch.

“You are empathizing right now?”

“Does it matter?” Will breathes into Hannibal’s neck.

Hannibal decides it does not.

Will presses his hips against Hannibal’s, gently at first then more insistently with each undulation. Hannibal feels Will’s fingers against the nape of his neck, hugging him closer. They rock back and forth in the bed, each fascinated and consumed by the other.

Hannibal is dimly aware of the smell of the coffee downstairs, of the smell of soap, cologne and sweat upon the satin. All he can taste is Will. Their lips are locked tight when Will’s phone rings. Will tears himself away to look at the phone. He needn’t have bothered. They both know who it is.

Wills shifts and stretches his arm out to reach the cell phone on the night stand. He gives Hannibal a questioning look. Will had not put his phone there. Hannibal had placed their phones where they could get to them hours ago. Will sighs and answers the phone.

“Hello? Jack.” Will closes his eyes as he listens.

“Ok. And where are you now?” Will sits up and yawns into the phone.

“I’ll get dressed and be there as soon as I can.”

He abruptly clicks off the phone and flops back down onto the bed.

“He’s in a mood.” Will says.

Hannibal stifles a grin. He pulls Will back over to him. He wants to feel his warmth, the caress of his skin against his own. Will does not resist. Will makes no move to get out of bed or get dressed. Hannibal gazes at the scar from Jack’s bullet on Will’s shoulder as Will gazes about his bedroom.

Hannibal’s phone rings on the opposite night stand.

“Your turn.” Will says.

Hannibal picks up his phone.

“Hello….yes, Jack…Of course. I’ll get dressed and be there as soon as I can.”

Hannibal clicks off the phone and looks to Will.

Will is chewing on his lower lip. “You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

Will kicks lazily at the sheets and blankets. “We should go.”

“Yes. And arrive separately.”

“Agreed.”

“It will take you a little while to drive to Baltimore from Wolf Trap.”

“Yes, it will.”

“Plenty of time for coffee and a little breakfast.”

“I could eat.”

Hannibal rubs his toes against Will’s ankles. “Jack doesn’t like waiting.” Will says.

“Life is full of disappointments.” Hannibal responds.

Hannibal raises his wine glass to his lips. It is empty now. Chopin’s Nocturne is long over. Vivaldi’s Four Seasons - Spring now plays quietly. The sausage is cold.

Hannibal sets his jaw and he manages a tight swallow. He decides he isn’t really that hungry any way. He pours the remainder of the bottle into his glass, and clings to the remnants of that morning.

How Will had rolled his eyes at finding a toothbrush waiting for him in the bathroom. How he had gazed into the mirror downstairs in the foyer at the raised welts along his collarbone and neck.

How Hannibal had handed him his simple knitted scarf while smothering his own welts in cashmere and wool.

“Don’t even think about kissing me outside.” Will had said.

How disappointing it is that only remnants remain.

Chapter End Notes

> I experimented a little here with the tense. I wrote Chapter 14 memory palace entirely in the past. I found it awkward to write intimate scenes that way. I put Hannibal in the past here, but it is written in the present. I am not sure which is better or which reads better or if it is confusing for you. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Daniel reflects on Du Maurier, or Dumont, as he knows her. This invites thoughts of sex, and Will.

Humans rely on a certain degree of deceit to survive.
Humans do not really want the truth, not all of the time.
He acknowledges she was a little wasted, elegantly wasted, but still.
He wonders what she is like in a bar.
Maybe he should let her loose on Will.
He laughs aloud at the thought.

Chapter 20

Daniel reflects on Du Maurier, or Dumont, as he knows her. This invites thoughts of sex, and Will.

Anima Mundi, Roberto Ferri

Daniel pulls into his driveway overlooking the hills and terraces of Fiesole. He decides to leave the car in the drive figuring he will have to load up the trunk this evening anyway. He flips off the ignition, cursing as he twists around to the backseat to retrieve his gym bag. He should not have indulged that doctor at the pool. He had never felt as objectified as he had beneath her gaze. His skin still prickles as though the finely manicured nails she had tapped against the tumbler of ice and vodka had skimmed along his flesh eager to draw blood.

He sits still in his seat, staring over the steering wheel at the wall of his garage. Usually people's emotions churned, thick and dense like wet concrete in his mind. Du Maurier was not wet concrete. Neither was she dry leaves in the wind as Will had been to him upon their initial meeting. She was ice so cold that she burned him like fire. Like being sliced open with an icicle.

He'd wanted to run, but the mention of her suicidal patient had caused him to reconsider. He had been impressed with Dumont's insights into her patient and despite her clear sexual attraction to him; her clinical knowledge was dead on. He wanted to help Lydia if he could.

He had found the sensations from Dumont frightening and exciting. Every alarm in his head had gone off yet he could not deny the heat he had felt between his legs, the swell of blood stir in his cock at the thought of her mouth around it. She had a pretty mouth.

He imagines her mouth, supple and soft slipping over his skin, drawing him in and out until her lips are swollen and her throat is so bruised that days later, every time she swallows she thinks of him. He is pretty sure she was imagining the same thing.

Daniel had been both fascinated and repelled by the attention. He was used to the staring, especially from the opposite sex, but Dumont had sat enrapt of his every gesture, evincing a savage seething undercurrent. His jaw tightens with the knowledge he feels the same savage undercurrent in Will sometimes. And that does not bother him at all. It should.

Daniel sighs and opens the car door and steps out. With looks like hers, she must have no shortage of interested men. She had been singularly attracted to him. Her patient's suicide attempt had provided opportunity, almost like she had sought him out on a whim. She had apparently noticed him at the gym and had found in her patient a legitimate reason to approach him. Therapy with him would help her patient and provide her with multiple opportunities to pursue him. While not being the most noble of motives, her actions were hardly criminal.

She had not meant to put her primal emotions on display for him. It was not uncommon for people to say one thing and mean another, or to keep their true feelings cloaked. People did it all the time. What a world it would be if everyone saw people as he did. The entire fabric of polite society would disintegrate.

Humans rely on a certain degree of deceit to survive. Humans do not really want the truth, not all of the time. He acknowledges she was a little wasted, elegantly wasted, but still. He wonders what she is like in a bar. Maybe he should let her loose on Will. He laughs aloud at the thought.

What is Will's type anyway? As far as Daniel can tell romance has been off the table for Will for quite some time. The relationship he wanted with Alana Bloom never got off the ground. He had commiserated with Margot Verger, had sought solace in physical intimacy and had learned he had merely been the means to an end.

Daniel suspects Will's tryst with Margot had also been an act of self-affirmation. He had been intimate with Lecter by that time. Both relationships had been difficult for Will to talk about. Lecter had managed to interfere with tragic consequences. Even without Lecter's interference neither relationship could be characterized as promising. Neither relationship could have ever been fulfilling for Will.

Daniel had sat mute, listening to Will talk about both women and trying to remain detached so that Daniel would not feel the hurt he carried. Both women had rejected him, both in their own callous way. And Will had taken it.

If Lecter's interference had been limited to only those two individuals, Daniel would still be appalled. How Lecter had maintained his license to practice was a mystery. There must have been complaints, some allegations of malpractice.

Daniel pauses as he shuts the car door, swallows hard as his gym bag slips off his shoulder. Lecter probably ate them.

Daniel draws a deep breath and tries to resume his original train of thought. He thinks he is starting to sound like Will.

Dating is not an activity Will could have pursued over the past couple years and Daniel can understand that. He was not all that stable himself and he would not have wanted to expose a potential romantic interest to Lecter. Alana had already been in the thick of it.

Will had not dated much at all though, even before Crawford had drawn him into the Hobbs' case. Will is fairly celibate by his own admission, but he had evidently cut loose with Doctor Lecter.

Daniel has some ideas about that.

Daniel had known Will's feelings about Lecter were far too complex as to be reduced to a moral dilemma. Will couldn't know the barrage of emotions Daniel had felt every time Will had said his name.

Will's emotions had been easy enough to interpret when he had been describing the crime scenes of Beverly Katz and Georgia Madchen. Anger, guilt, a well of sadness had erupted. With Abigail, the pain had seared enough to cause tears. Daniel supposed he had learned to contain the emotion from other victims.

The mind can only handle so much and Will had learned to compartmentalize his grief and disgust for the numerous crime scenes he had profiled. It wasn't that he hadn't felt each one as freshly as the first each time; he had. He had learned to manage his emotions so he could look.

Daniel cannot imagine feeling both killer and victim at the same time. Cannot imagine the shock of realizing you identified more with the killer than the victim, and identified so much that you could think like him. Understand him. Become him.

That was the horror Will lived with every day. And that was the allure for Hannibal Lecter.

Will is twisted up into knots over Lecter. Lecter has become a part of Will. Will can never, never be without him. He can only learn to live with him. Will is only now coming to grips with this.

Daniel knows he cannot undo what Lecter has done to Will. Will has come to him with hopes that he can. Will said he needs to manage his mind, needs a counter weight, an anchor. And that is rational Will talking, always managing expectations. Irrational Will wants Lecter out of his head and wants back what was taken from him.

Daniel can deliver what rational Will wants. But first, Will has to be honest with himself. He is not there yet.

As far as Daniel knows there are only two emotions capable of causing the kind of emotional turmoil he feels from Will. Two powerful emotions at war with each other. And Will feels them both, in equal measure.

Love and Hate.

Will clings to the hate. He remembers with perfect clarity each and every cruel manipulation, each horrendous deed. He hugs the remorse and guilt close so that the hate remains in his mind's eye far from his heart's embrace. He hates Lecter. He hates what Lecter did to him. He hates himself for allowing it. For enjoying it.

Everything he sees, touches, and feels cause him to experience either or both of those emotions. Both emotions are connected to Lecter. They are because everything in Will's universe is connected to Lecter. By design.

He refuses to acknowledge the emotions he pushes away, keeps at arms' length. If he embraces those emotions, he invites the emotion that terrifies him most of all.

Will does not want to acknowledge the love.

He wants to believe Lecter manipulated him with conditioning techniques, flashing lights, and drugs. If Will can believe that is true, his hate can remain pure and his vengeance becomes righteous. He does not want to believe that his feelings are his own.

But Will liked the violence. He was manipulated into expressing it, but he enjoyed it. He may have been manipulated into Hannibal's bed, but he enjoyed that, too. The sex was part of Will's manipulation of Lecter, part of the trap. Will could tell himself that to a point.

Sex is not love. But, if Will had truly used sex to lure Lecter, he would not be twisted up inside.

Delving into *that* aspect their relationship is going to be a hell of a therapy session. Daniel understands the emotional entanglements that will assuredly come place him in a very sensitive position. He realizes he is uniquely qualified to help Will through this, and he knows there is only one way to really know what is going on in Will's head.

If he can get Will to a happy place in his mind, the therapy will go much better. Will has already demonstrated a willingness to subject himself to unorthodox practices. After being subjected to Lecter's brand, Daniel doubts Will will even blink an eye at Daniel's proposal.

Well, he may blink once. Daniel sure as hell won't be writing in any journals about it. The loss of his license would be the least of his worries.

Hopefully, this fishing trip will allow Daniel some insight into that part of Will's universe that is not associated with Lecter. Daniel needs to see Will engaged in an activity he associates with home and happiness so Daniel can create some kind of emotional baseline. He needs to feel Will's emotions when he's not under pressure, or upset, or traumatized.

And Will needs a break from his life of extremes. He needs to do something…normal.

Will was a teacher once. He was a cop. In their current dynamic, Daniel is the authority figure. The relationship is doctor and patient, for the most part. Will needs to be the authority figure, needs to be the teacher again, if only for a little while.

A little role reversal will equalize things, invite reciprocity, and strengthen the foundation of trust they have between them. Will wants to believe in the best of people. Daniel wants to give him reason to keep believing that.

He walks up to his house, hears the girls barking and fussing inside since he left the kitchen window open again. He really hates air conditioning, but the dogs would die in the summer if he did not turn it on. He lugs his briefcase and gym bag up the walkway and unlocks the back door.

He wonders what kind of therapist Dumont is, besides a very successful one. She must restrict her patient base to the rich and famous with her wardrobe and jewelry. She is way out of his league.

Well, he will learn soon enough if her patient wants to see him. Dumont will call his office for an appointment or she won't. Daniel is not surprised that a fellow psychiatrist is a little fucked up;

perhaps she is even in treatment for something herself. Daniel is sure there is a lot more going on in that woman's head than Daniel cares to know.

He shoves thoughts of the odd psychiatrist out of his head. Will is going to be here soon and he hates feeling rushed.

He lets the dogs out for a quick pee in the yard before ushering them inside. He had cleaned up earlier, but he had meant to be packed for the trip before Will arrived. He reprimands himself for leaving his watch. He could have sworn he had it with him. He must have dropped it by the pool. He'll have to call after he feeds the dogs.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Du Maurier is curious. She gives in to whimsy.

His garage sets on a lower terrace. She sees he has parked his car in the drive and already made his way up the stone walkway to the house. She can hear him clattering about in his kitchen, music from a local radio station hums through the open door off the patio. He sings along softly, his Italian impressive and his voice actually on key. The friend must be coming to dinner.

Chapter 21

Du Maurier is curious. She gives in to whimsy.

Du Maurier slips her phone back into her clutch purse. The driver acknowledged her text. He will wait for her at the café while she takes her walk. She reflects on her conversation with Clayton as she meanders along the stone walled avenues and tumbling vines.

Clayton's response to her is atypical. She had expected a more playful response from him. He should have been flattered by her ego stroking but her attempts at flirting had been rebuffed, so she had slipped into professional mode.

He should have jumped at the lucrative possibilities of treating Lydia. Even as a consulting psychiatrist, he could charge a hefty sum. But he had wanted to consult pro bono. Du Maurier did not believe anyone consulted pro bono anymore.

Clayton had extended a professional courtesy to let her know in no uncertain terms that this consult would be a one-time offer. To accept payment would be to invite further referrals. He does not want them, at least not from her.

Du Maurier is completely baffled. She is more intrigued now than ever.

She had been subtle at the table, wearing her usual patina of cultured reserve and yet Clayton had behaved like a deer hearing the snap of a twig. Du Maurier had felt uncomfortably transparent. Sitting across from him at the table felt too much like sitting across from Graham at FBI headquarters. She had felt like she was being assessed, profiled.

Clayton's expressive green eyes had searched her face tirelessly as they had talked; his face a constant distraction. The eye contact, the licking of lips, the brush of fingers across his mouth, had been tantalizing, as if he had smelled Du Maurier's lust in the very air they breathed and had been infected by it. Had acted on it. Curious.

Of course, he would have no idea how far that lust extended or what forms it could take.

And yet, his concern for her patient had been genuine. His compassion over her suicide attempt had been evident in his tone of voice and unmistakably clear in his eyes.

Clayton was an intriguing mix; there were obviously layers to him that her initial assessment had missed. His preference for his music over human interaction was to blame, at least partially. She admits her observations of him have been largely devoid of other people. He is often alone. Du Maurier considers that his resemblance to Graham is not limited to the physical similarities and this is an alarming thought.

Also alarming are thoughts of Hannibal. The nagging feeling that he might have seen the dossier on Clayton hangs like a cobweb. And yet, he has given no indication that he has. The only picture of Clayton had been almost a decade old. She would have preferred no photos at all, but leaving the article incomplete would have drawn attention.

It would seem that it does not matter. Hannibal is preoccupied with his own thoughts. He is still pining for Graham. No matter what he says.

It occurs to Du Maurier that this attempt at closure is a ruse to placate her concerns so that Hannibal can track Graham to wherever he is through legal channels previously unexplored. If Hannibal's lawyers engage Graham's lawyer, Hannibal will find a way to locate Graham.

I see his madness and I want to contain it…like an oil spill.

Oil is valuable…What value does Will Graham's madness hold for you?

You are suggesting I am more fascinated with the madness than the man?

Are you?

No…

Will Graham's madness had indeed spilled all over Hannibal so that Hannibal was slick with it. Hannibal had always been provocative, always curious…but never emotional. His behavior is no longer predictable. His needs and desires are no longer hers. The need to pull him closer has arisen out of this new dynamic between them.

Du Maurier imagines nearly every micro expression that graces Hannibal's face to be caused by Graham. If she continues to indulge in her wine; she will likely start seeing his image everywhere too, even outside of the hot tub.

Du Maurier knows why she fantasizes about Graham in the hot tub. It is the same reason she pursues Clayton. She wants to take something of Graham from Hannibal. To demystify him somehow. Hannibal had systematically removed all of Graham's ties to his life outside of Hannibal. Hannibal had wanted Graham all to himself and for a short time he accomplished that.

What had Hannibal enjoyed with him? What was it about Graham that Hannibal had risked so much to keep him? She doubts she will ever know. She can never experience Graham as Hannibal has, but she can satisfy other desires with Clayton. He looks enough like Graham to have walked right out of one of Hannibal's drawings.

Hannibal used to draw sketches of her in early morning light, French coffee and croissants scattered among pencil scrapings and dusty pastels. He had kept them in a portfolio tied up in satin ribbon. Graham had rated fully realized portraits in subtle shades of grey charcoal, pen and ink. Hannibal had matted and framed them himself selecting only the rarest of woods with which to encase and preserve his beloved.

Du Maurier had seen and tolerated the numerous charcoal sketches of Graham Hannibal had drawn over the past year, all of them faithfully reproducing every detail from memory. Du Maurier was certain they were recreations of earlier work, sketched while Graham had dozed nude, twisted up in satin, sprawled in Hannibal's bed. And while the bedroom sketches had been figure studies in real time, there had been plenty of fantasy drawings as well. Graham's face had graced more than one reworking of Saint Sebastian themed drawings, bloodied and martyred and exquisitely rendered.

Most infuriating was the fact that Hannibal had left his work out purposely, not caring if Du Maurier saw them or not. Du Maurier wonders if Graham is aware of the throne Hannibal has placed him on. That knowledge would indeed be dangerous in the hands of Graham. Graham would exploit that knowledge and enjoy doing so. Hannibal would find himself torn between self-preservation and desire for the very thing that seeks to destroy him.

She glances at her watch as she walks. She adjusts her gait, no need to break a heel. She will be at Clayton's house soon enough. The hills of Fiesole do not deter, she takes them in stride enjoying the stretch of muscles in her legs and the tug in her abdomen as she walks. She does not like the sweat.

Du Maurier wonders how Graham sees Hannibal now. What revelations have manifested in that brilliant imagination of his? More importantly, what are Graham's revelations about her? She cannot be sure what he intuited from their exchange all those months ago.

It may be small comfort, but I am convinced Hannibal has done what he honestly believes is the best for you.

No, that isn't small comfort; that would be no comfort.

She had offered a truth knowing Graham would take that truth as evidence of Hannibal's ability to fool even his own psychiatrist. He would only understand the subtext of that truth if Du Maurier could convince him that she understood perfectly.

I believe you.

She had left Graham plenty of food for thought, sustenance to fuel his anger. Anger leads to action. And act he had. Unpredictably.

Her thoughts return to Clayton as she ambles along the cobbled streets towards Clayton's house. She has been to his home many times, watched him toil in his garden, take meals on his patio, sip coffee and pet his dogs as he gazes over the city of Florence below.

He lives off of Via Fra Giovanni, near the Piazza Mino da Fiesole, close to the top of the highest hill. The house is situated on a fine piece of real estate, well-chosen and well maintained. It is a three story town house, mustard yellow stucco walls with rustic brownish red shutters and steps. Vines and glazed pots of flowers adorn the walls and creep over the terrace out front. Du Maurier has already seen the garden around back. He grows vegetables and flowers with equal success.

His garage sets on a lower terrace. She sees he has parked his car in the drive and already made his way up the stone walkway to the house. She can hear him clattering about in his kitchen, music from a local radio station hums through the open door off the patio. He sings along softly, his Italian impressive and his voice actually on key. The friend must be coming to dinner.

Du Maurier walks past Clayton's house to the next street, takes a left and walks to take up a vantage point from a market and tavern situated a street below but offering an unobstructed view of Clayton's backyard from the rear of the tavern where tables and chairs are scattered under an awning.

From here, she can see his entire patio, terrace, driveway, and garden. Du Maurier checks her emails, clicks on an issue of *Cosmopolitan,* another guilty indulgence, and settles in to enjoy her magazine, and the view. There are a few other patrons braving the heat, tourists she decides.

Du Maurier adjusts her sun hat and removes her sunglasses.

The cute server appears and asks what she would like to drink. She laughs to herself thinking if she drinks another vodka tonic she might see Will Graham appear before her. She orders a cappuccino despite the heat, and leans back in her chair.

She watches Clayton go in and out of his back door, intermittently bringing out tableware and wine glasses, and finally begins to tackle the gas grill. He curses loudly as the flames leap up, nearly singeing his shirt.

She observes him bring out a plate, light a cigarette, go back inside, bring out a huge bowl of what looked like salad greens and a wine bucket sloshing ice and water over the table. He soaks up the spilled water with a towel and then tosses the towel to the side of the patio in a damp heap.

The dogs bark excitedly from within the house and Du Maurier imagines his guest has arrived. Clayton disappears into the house. She resumes her reading, glancing at the patio and the door every so often.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Will arrives for dinner and dogs.

“Damn.” Daniel says, “What a dog magnet you are.” He stands back allowing his dogs to fuss over Will as much as he will allow, which is apparently quite a lot.

“Shelter dogs, right?” Will says, stroking the cautious black one. She wriggles like a sausage with legs against Will’s knees as he rubs and strokes at her fur.

“Yeah. Both of them.” Daniel says, “Both females. Seems Italians like their males, the shelter is mostly females. And these two…adopted me.”

“Hmmm, the unwanted are always the most grateful and affectionate ones.” Will says softly, stroking the ears of the little black one. “This one’s Cara? Some kind of herding dog?”

Chapter 22

Will arrives for dinner and dogs.

Will pays the cab driver and grabs his duffle bags from the backseat. He moves his jaw from side to side in an effort to ease his anxiety. He is not anxious about the trip or seeing Daniel. He cannot remember the last time he looked at his files. Lucia had called once to let Will know they had begun their searches of orphanages in Lithuania. He can’t remember how many days ago that was. He is losing time again.

Right now, he feels lucid, aware and vaguely hungry. He smells an outdoor grill and his stomach rumbles.

It was only yesterday he talked to Daniel on the phone, but it feels longer than that. The hours had ticked by slowly and Will had had only his laundry to keep him company. Day had crawled into night and Will had crawled into bed with his usual trepid resignation.

His imagination never failed him and he wished it would. His dreams had fulfilled all his expectations once again. He smiles bitterly. At least he had had clean shirts and sheets this time.

The dreams are relentless. The stag no longer haunts his dreamscape. The snow has melted to reveal a forest swallowed by flames. As he walks he feels the crunching of not ice - but hot cinders beneath the soles of his boots. The wolf is no longer white, but grey, like the smoky sky above. The charred remains of the trees rise from the ground like brittle bones. The wolf follows him along the smoldering path they forge through the ruined woods.

Silence, torturous silence pervades as Will walks through the once beautiful forest his footfalls lost to the deafening quiet that claims each step he takes. The stream is dry; the rocks along its bed are cracked and coated with dust. The dust is all that remains of the rolling stream. The maddening silence is eventually pierced by the cry of the black eagle with the blood rimmed eyes. Will's blood chills in his veins.

He feels its twin stir beneath the scar that seems to tighten along his flesh.

Will follows the eagle as it flies over head, he can hear its wings beating over the thud of his heart and the crackling of burnt brittle gravel at his boots. Except he knows he does not tread on gravel.

He doesn't look down as he staggers along. He knows if he looks he will see what he nearly trips over with every step. He doesn't want to see. The sky looms darker ahead. The pounding of wings stops and the rustling of feathers ahead signals the eagle's descent.

He knows the eagle waits for him. He wakes with the smell of smoke in his nostrils and his shirt drenched as though the heat burning his boots and licking at his face had been real. Will knows he has to look eventually.

He contemplates Daniel's house from the driveway, admiring the landscaping and the classically Italianate architecture. Will thinks if he lived in Tuscany, he would want a home just like this one, pretty, well kept, and large enough to accommodate a family. Except, perhaps, he would find a place a little further out in the country…

He looks around at the other houses nearby with their sun drenched porches, yards full of flowers, and barefoot children running beneath clotheslines filled with fresh smelling sheets and shirts. He hears Daniel's dogs barking from inside the house and looks to the screened door. He can see them pacing and waging their tails from where he stands at the edge of the drive yet he remains rooted to the spot as the dogs bark.

For the briefest of moments he is standing in Wolf Trap on a sunny summer's morning in front of his porch, Winston pacing at the door.

"Will!" Daniel calls from inside.

Will looks up and grins at him. He doesn't feel like smiling, but he does so anyway. Daniel always looks pleased to see him. His enthusiasm is infectious.

"Look out! Incoming…"

Daniel opens the screened door and is nearly knocked over by the dogs who rush toward Will. Will braces himself for the impact as both dogs sniff and jump at him. He drops his bags and falls to his knees so he can avoid being pawed to death.

Will is all too happy to oblige the dogs as they push their wet noses into his clothes, his collar, and his face. He has missed his own dogs terribly and revels in the sensation of their soft fur on his skin. He ruffles the fur along their backs and massages their ears, alternating between dogs, mindful of the smaller black dog that keeps getting shoved aside by the larger dog.

"Hey, Hey…" Will averts his head from the slobbering tongue inches from his face, "Who are you? Huh? Ah, right there…that's it…"

He massages the neck of the larger dog as she buries her head in his lap. Daniel does not miss the longing in Will's eyes, the sadness that flickers in the pools of blue as he cups Bella's shaggy face in his hands. But Will is smiling and that is what is important.

He looks better he feels Daniel decides. There is slightly darkened flesh beneath his eyes, the rims faintly tinged pink from lack of sleep. He is groomed with clean clothes as always, but Daniel can feel the fatigue. He knows Will play it off until he remembers Daniel knows better. Then, he will be able to talk about it.

"Damn." Daniel says, "What a dog magnet you are." He stands back allowing his dogs to fuss over Will as much as he will allow, which is apparently quite a lot.

"Shelter dogs, right?" Will says, stroking the cautious black one. She wriggles like a sausage with legs against Will's knees as he rubs and strokes at her fur.

"Yeah. Both of them." Daniel says, "Both females. Seems Italians like their males, the shelter is mostly females. And these two…adopted me."

"Hmmm, the unwanted are always the most grateful and affectionate ones." Will says softly, stroking the ears of the little black one. "This one's Cara? Some kind of herding dog?"

"I think so, they are both mixes, I never bothered to ask…" The larger dog begins vying for Will's attention.

"And this one is Bella." Will says, eyes distant with thoughts of Crawford's wife. "Got any toys?"

"In the yard somewhere." Daniel looks around, finds a chewed up tennis ball near the porch. "Here you go."

He tosses it to Will who catches it, squeezes it in his hand above the dogs' heads.

"Yeah," Will dangles the tattered green ball from his fingers, "This one's your favorite, isn't it…"

He commences tossing it to the dogs, and they listen to his commands to take turns. Will is impressed they are well trained to alternate and they stay clear of the road. It is evident that Daniel has spent a great deal of time with them.

Daniel sits down on the porch to watch Will bond with the dogs. He knows playing with them allows Will to get out of his head for a while. Even better, Will will like how he feels with them. He will want to feel that way again. And the dogs will pick up on Will's loneliness and exploit his kindness as only dogs can.

Bella and Cara will make sure Will is the center of attention. They will twist themselves inside out for him. Will is already once again down on his knees fighting with Bella over the ball, grass and dog hair sticking to his clothes.

After a while, Daniel whistles and snaps his fingers at the two dogs. They pause, looking from Will to Daniel. Will tosses the ball back to Daniel. Daniel walks over to his dogs, ruffles each of them behind the ears.

"C'mon girls. Leave him alone. Enough play for now…" He tugs at Bella's collar and she relents. Cara retreats behind Daniel's legs, large brown eyes still fixed on Will.

“Here,” Daniel leans over to retrieve Will’s bags. “I’ll put these inside while you walk the girls around back to the patio. I’ll meet you around back.” He pauses seeing Will’s somber expression.

“Everything ok?”

Will manages a weak smile, “Oh it’s me, remember? Of course I’m not ok…but I’ll survive. Go ahead, take the stuff inside.”

Will whistles to the dogs and Daniel watches them follow him through the yard. He carts the bags inside and tosses them on the couch so he can grab the wine he has been chilling out of the fridge. Daniel reaches the patio first and is relieved he has time to check the grill before the dogs come bounding around the corner, Will in tow.

Miraculously, he hasn’t burned down the patio with all the interruptions. He reaches for the bowl covered in tin foil. Will joins him next to the grill.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Well, what else could two Americans in Italy want?”

“Not burgers…”

“I almost did make burgers, but I marinated ribs instead.”

Will opens the grill to find two racks of pork, thick and dripping over the flames.

“Smells delicious.” He says watching Daniel apply more marinade to the ribs. Daniel gets the feeling Will is not finding them as delicious as he said.

“Yeah, I pre-cooked them so they won’t take too long. Should be ready soon. It’s really too hot to cook inside.”

“I hardly ever grilled outside. But I always enjoy it when someone else does.”

Will feels his stomach rumble again and not in a good way. But Daniel is standing beside him, and his peculiar mist that smells of tidal spray and sand envelopes his mind again. Will clings to that, tries to ignore the nauseous feeling in his gut and the prickle of the scar beneath his pale shirt.

Will pulls out a chair. He notices the opened bottle of wine chilling in the bucket. He picks it up to check the label. It’s a local vintage, Pomino, the label reads. “What’s a Pomino?”

“The region. It’s a Tuscan variety - it’s like a California Chardonnay.”

“Oh. White wine with ribs? No beer?”

“If you’re going to be fussy, there’s red inside, but it’s awfully hot for red. And no, I forgot beer.”

Will smiles. He doesn’t really care; he just enjoys arguing with Daniel. “What kind of red? I am a bit fussy about wine.” Will says.

Daniel turns from the grill to look at Will. Will meets his eyes and drops the wine back in the bucket with a splash.

"Hmmm, something for you? There's some cheap chianti. I hope it hasn't turned in this heat. Could be vinegar by now." Daniel flicks the spatula at him and adds, "I doubt you'd even notice."

"Huh. You know, I could use a glass of water."

"Bottles are in the fridge. Any particular brand of *that* you prefer?"

Will grins and walks to the back door. The kitchen is nearly as hot as the backyard from Daniel leaving the door open.

"What? No air conditioning either?" Will laughs as Daniel turns back to the grill, waving him off.

Will ducks inside the kitchen. He's not sure what he was expecting, but the kitchen is immaculate except for the necessary ingredients of their current meal scattered on the marble counter. The walls are brick red; the floors are actually tiled, not covered in prefabricated faux tiled flooring. He can see hardwood and stone down the hall.

Will feels at home here. The colors are warm and rich. He can smell the pine cleaner Daniel must have used shortly before he arrived. Will smiles to himself as he realizes Daniel must have cleaned up a bit for his house guest. He sees the water bowls for the dogs and their leashes hanging from hooks near the door. Dog smell. Will has missed that.

He smells perfume, too. Not men's cologne. This is a distinctly feminine scent. He has smelled this fragrance before. In Daniel's office and now here. He is certain it is the same scent. He still can't place it.

Will grabs two bottles of water from the fridge and makes a mental note to ask Daniel about the perfume. He considers Daniel had another friend over earlier. Or another patient. He walks back outside and sits down at the table across from Daniel.

Will thinks he has never seen any of Daniel's other patients. There must be another exit, a privacy exit in his office. He is always the last patient of the day so he leaves the way he came in. Still, he has never seen anyone outside either. Perhaps Daniel schedules his patients this way deliberately.

"Are you going to lurk in the doorway all night?"

Daniel's voice interrupts Will's thoughts. He returns to the patio. Daniel motions for Will to turn around.

"I don't think you noticed the view from here. Take a look behind you, to the east."

Will turns and walks to the far end of Daniel's patio. He can see Florence in the distance, hazy hills beyond the city. He can make out the Arno snaking through the landscape below.

"Right in your backyard. No wonder you love it here. What's past the hills?"

"Oh, let's see. You're going past the Boboli Gardens, past Palazzo Pitti, the next town is Impruneta. You can barely see it from here on a clear day. Not today though, too humid."

"I imagine the view of the Basilica…di Santa Maria del Fiore has been the same for centuries."

"Yeah…" Daniel says softly, taking the water bottle from Will's fingers. "Your Italian is getting better. Pronunciation anyway."

Will smiles. “Thanks, but my tone is flat. I don’t think I’ll ever speak it as you do.”

“You never know. Stay here long enough you might. *Sentirsi Italiano nel tuo cuore.”* Daniel holds a hand over his chest and gestures with the other toward the basilica.

“Right…Italians speak with their hands. You do feel Italian at heart don’t you? You’ve lost some of your Americanisms.”

“I love Italians. They are very passionate people.” Daniel raises an eyebrow and gestures toward the table.

The ribs sit on a huge ceramic plate between the place settings. The wine has been poured. The dogs sit on either side of table with tongues hanging out.

“Ready to eat?’

Will sets the water down, points to the dogs. “No…. Are the dogs joining us?”

“Well, where else would they be?” Daniel strokes Bella’s head. “What…your dogs didn’t eat with you? How is that even possible?”

Will throws up his hands in surrender. “It’s your house, my mistake.”

Daniel cracks open a water bottle. If he’s going to drink that wine, he figures he should hydrate a little. It has to be close to a hundred degrees and the sun hasn’t set yet.

“Seriously, Will. You locked the dogs up when you ate?”

Daniel pulls out a chair and Will does the same. The both help themselves to the pile of napkins and line their laps with them. The ribs are dripping with the glaze of marinade and Will thinks there might not be enough napkins.

“I didn’t have to lock them up.” Will says, “They behaved if I was eating at the table…” Will stops speaking as Daniel drops a morsel of meat into Cara’s mouth.

“Oh, C’mon…” Will takes a gulp of wine. “Next you’ll tell me she sleeps with you, too.”

Daniel raises his eyebrows, a sheepish grin on his face. Will rolls his eyes.

“Wakes me with kisses every morning.” Daniel says lifting his glass in a mock toast. “To man’s best friend.”

Will nods his head and lifts his glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Who is this friend of Doctor Clayton? Du Maurier had to ask.

The gait of his walk, the tilt of his head… Du Maurier feels the blood drain from her face.

“Are you alright?” the girl asks.

“Yes, No…I need a moment.” She manages, her eyes glued to Clayton’s backyard.

Chapter 23

Who is this friend of Doctor Clayton? Du Maurier had to ask.

Du Maurier lifts her head from the magazine in search of the server. Her cup is empty and though the heat is unpleasant, she does not get quite the caffeine buzz from iced coffee. The annoying bark of Clayton’s dogs resonates across the sloping green terraces.

As her eyes track up the hill to Daniel’s backyard, the clerk appears at her table and takes the oversized cup from Du Maurier’s fingers. Du Maurier barely notices as she blinks repeatedly, her breath caught someplace between chest and throat.

Clayton stands before his grill. Another young man has rounded the corner of his house trailing the dogs behind him. He raises his arm to run his hand through dark curly locks that hang in a familiar tousled way framing a familiar bearded face. He stands next to Clayton at the grill, and then walks over to the table.

The gait of his walk, the tilt of his head… Du Maurier feels the blood drain from her face.

“Are you alright?” the girl asks.

“Yes, No…I need a moment.” She manages, her eyes glued to Clayton’s backyard.

The young clerk looks up the hill where Du Maurier’s gaze is trained on two young men, one sits at a table, the other stands by a grill. Their voices do not carry on the slight breeze, but it is evident they are enjoying themselves.

Du Maurier reminds herself to breathe. The one who is not Clayton goes into the house. Clayton remains at the grill. Du Maurier blinks several times. She must be imagining it, a mild case of fatigue coupled with anxiety and alcohol and this heat.

“Do you know them?” the girl asks.

“No…” Du Maurier sucks in a breath. Her throat is unbearably dry. She reaches for the glass of water. It is wet and it nearly slips from her hand. She almost chokes on the slice of lemon floating on top.

Her server doesn’t seem to notice. Her eyes are fixed on the patio, too.

“Too bad. Because they are too cute, don’t you think? I would love to be sitting at that table right now.” She flicks her hair out of her eyes and wanders off.

Du Maurier feels sick. The heat is suddenly overwhelming. She must be ill. Her subconscious fears have finally manifested themselves into her waking existence. Clearly vodka and the Tuscan sun do not mix.

This entire ordeal with Graham has traumatized her to the point that she is hallucinating.

She must get another look if only to dispel the imminent panic attack. She thinks she is losing her mind. She looks around for the server. She tells herself to be calm. Clayton is having dinner with a friend. They are not going anywhere for the present. She must calm down and be rational.

That cannot be Will Graham having dinner with Clayton. Clayton looks like Graham. Maybe he has a brother. Clayton did say friend, however. Du Maurier swallows back the espresso and milk that gurgles in the back of her throat.

The server approaches Du Maurier with another cappuccino. “Here…Signorina.” The young girl says, balancing the large cup and saucer on her tray, “On the house. You look like you could use it.”

“Thank you. Most kind of you.” Du Maurier manages to sound polite. She eyes the fresh cup, frothy and steaming. She feels sick all over again.

Du Maurier sweeps her hair away from her cheek as the girl sets the cup down on the table. Du Maurier watches her disappear back inside. She adjusts her seat so that she sits in less exposed position. Clayton won’t notice her; he hasn’t so far, but if that is Graham…

Her mind clamps down on the panic like a steel trap. She breathes deeply and begins to sip at the hot beverage, knowing it will ground her.

The dark haired guest returns to the patio carrying two bottles of water. Du Maurier watches him open a bottle and swallow down half of it. He hands the other bottle to Clayton who has appeared at his side. He wipes his arm across his mouth and looks out over the patio. It is the face Du Maurier would know anywhere.

Du Maurier realizes Clayton does indeed resemble Hannibal’s obsession. He could pass for Graham from a distance, but not up close. Not if the real thing is standing next to him, absently tracing his fingers along his pale yellow tee-shirt just above his belt as he gazes into the distance.

Will Graham is in Florence.

Du Maurier cannot tear her eyes away from the train wreck on the patio. She feels numb.

Seeing the two of them side by side is jaw dropping. How is this possible? What kind of universe is this?

She wishes she could be invisible, but that fantasy aside, she must arrange her thoughts, prioritize the evidence before her.

His arrival in Florence suggests many possibilities.

What would Graham be doing here except…?

Hannibal. Graham is looking for Hannibal. Does Hannibal know? What was Hannibal up to?

Du Maurier sits in a stupor as time stands still and all rational thought evaporates from her mind. She cannot focus. The sight of Graham seated across from his doppelganger is too much for Du Maurier to process at the moment.

She can see the two of them clearly from her table, she watches them laughing and talking, licking fingers and gnawing at bones. Glazed fingers grab at wine glasses, and napkins graze across lips smeared with grease and sauce.

The cappuccino settles in her stomach. Her stomach churns. She realizes she has not eaten in hours. She waves for the little server to come back and orders an antipasto. She munches on the breadsticks as she waits for her salad.

She has been observing Clayton for three weeks and in all that time she has not caught even a whiff of Graham. Where does he stay? How long has he been in Florence? How did he meet Clayton?

Of course, Graham needs a psychiatrist. He is still recovering. He chose Clayton because of the dogs. And possibly the empathy. How much does Clayton know?

Clayton could not have known who she was this afternoon. He was reluctant for reasons she could not guess, but not because she was a person of interest and wanted by the FBI.

Du Maurier can see the two of them have developed a comfortable rapport. Graham actually looks healthy, at least from this distance. And he is smiling, laughing even. His entire visage changes with the laughter, like he is a different person.

If this really is Graham he either has amnesia or Clayton is one hell of a psychiatrist.

The FBI washed their hands of him. He is here alone. It is unlikely that he knows Hannibal is actually here. He has been here long enough to develop a relationship with Clayton. If Graham knew Hannibal was here, he would not waste any time confronting him. If Hannibal knew Graham was here, he would not be wandering around Florence lost in art galleries and pruning his garden. Graham has not contacted Hannibal, nor will he. He is hunting.

Du Maurier needs to know where Graham is living.

She daintily picks up another bread stick, rolls it thoughtfully between her fingers. She inserts the twist tasting of butter and garlic into her mouth and slowly licks at the crumbles of cheese as she thinks, slipping the toasted twist back and forth between her lips.

There are ways to find out. She can call the cab companies. It will take time to narrow down which company, but finding the cab that drove out to Fiesole today will not be too difficult. She has been forced to do some sleuthing in her profession before.

She takes out her phone and leaves a message for the driver to pick her up in an hour. She will go back to the estate, relax and plan. She must now rethink her entire strategy with Hannibal.

Hannibal. She cannot introduce Clayton to Hannibal now. She shudders in the chair. If she had already given that dossier to Hannibal she would have led him straight to Graham. Hannibal will most certainly never transfer the funds if he knows Graham is here.

Whether Hannibal truly intends to give Graham his gift or if he is using it as a means to find Graham is irrelevant if he learns Graham is seeing a psychiatrist an hour away from his villa.

Du Maurier stops sucking on the breadstick as her eyes grow wide. Only an hour away. What would Hannibal do if he saw Graham and Dr. Clayton together? Once Hannibal had regained his senses from swooning over his beloved’s proximity, Hannibal would be insanely curious. And, insanely jealous.

Depending on the nature of Graham’s relationship with Dr. Clayton, Hannibal might even start rummaging through his recipes.

Du Maurier tears a chunk of breadstick and chews with relish and a renewed appetite. There must be a way to get Hannibal to transfer those funds before setting him loose upon dear Doctor Clayton and the troublesome Graham. If Hannibal transfers the funds, she will have his code and be on a plane to Switzerland while he amuses himself with the boys. If not, he will amuse himself anyway and she may yet find a silver lining in the dark cloud that is Will Graham.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

> Will can't keep his demons down. Daniel wants them out. But not like this.
>
> “That…is an extension of your subconscious. Associations. Part of you wants to expel Lecter and part of you…doesn’t.”
>
> “That is bull shit. Don’t give me that psycho bull shit, Daniel. I don’t have any parts that want to keep him.” Will grabs a towel and dries his face.
>
> I have to deal with you. And my feelings about you. I think it’s best if I do that directly.

Chapter 24

Will can't keep his demons down. Daniel wants them out. But not like this.

Will takes the wash cloth Daniel extends to him as he hangs his head over the toilet. He wipes the cool cloth over his face and neck, flushes the toilet.

“I think it’s just dry heaves now.” He stands up a little shakily, his knees numb from kneeling on the tile.

“Why didn’t you tell me you weren’t eating meat?”

“I keep a diet log for you, don’t you read it?” Will exhales slowly feeling the flexing of his stomach muscles still reeling from the purging of its contents all over the not so white porcelain. He swallows down the frustration mounting inside. “I hoped I could keep it down.”

Daniel thinks a moment. “It’s all pasta in your log. I didn’t make the connection. I’m sorry. I should have been looking for that. What did you have at the restaurant that night, after the cops picked you up?”

“Shrimp scampi.”

“Well, it could have been the heat…”

“It wasn’t. I can’t…handle the taste.”

Will closes his eyes remembering the meals, the delicate sauces and marinades, the assortment of exotic fruits paired with equally exotic vegetables arranged with flair and distinction on the plate. But these were mere distractions from the most rarified of entrees to ever grace a table. Every cut of meat, every organ had been carefully selected and prepared with the utmost attention to detail. And so delicious the tongue screamed for more while the mind simply screamed…

Daniel is quiet. “Christ..the ribs weren’t…”

“People? Yeah, I know. I threw up because I know the…difference. I think I still expect the…other white meat.”

Daniel watches Will stand over the sink, saturate the cloth with cold water, and wipe over his face again. Will’s mental battle is not only interrupting his sleep, the battle has spilled into his gut. His body has been drawn into the war, too.

“Why do you think that’s the reason?” Daniel leans against the wall to give Will more space. It is getting really warm and close in the small bathroom. And the lingering smell of vomit is not too pleasant either.

“Because I was eating…Lecter’s cooking for weeks, and even before that. I couldn’t keep anything down in the hospital that had meat in it, and after I left the hospital, I still couldn’t.”

“Are you sure it’s not my cooking?”

Will blinks and stares at Daniel with mouth open. “Now that…was funny.” He wrings the facecloth out, shakes it and hangs it over the sink.

Daniel rubs at his face. This is not how he imagined the evening going. Not at all.

“If you’ve been on a restricted diet for months, then eating a plate full of ribs like that is bound to make you sick. You couldn’t possibly still be physically affected by your uh… former diet.”

Will gestures to the toilet.

“That…is an extension of your subconscious. Associations. Part of you wants to expel Lecter and part of you…doesn’t.”

“That is bull shit. Don’t give me that psycho bull shit, Daniel. I don’t have any parts that want to keep him.” Will grabs a towel and dries his face.

I have to deal with you. And my feelings about you. I think it’s best if I do that directly.

Will buries his face in the towel, breathes into it until he feels his fingers relax against the terrycloth. He finishes drying off his neck and sets it on the vanity. He knows Daniel can empathize with him, is empathizing with him right now. That double edged sword of intimacy carves into him again.

Daniel sees Will’s jaw locked tight. Feels Will’s anger creep along his own jaw and find its way to his limbs, twining around his own fingers. Oh, how Will loves his anger.

Daniel sighs watching Will grit his teeth. He can imagine the nasty acidic slime that must coat everything in his mouth. It’s not like Daniel had never been sick before. He had leaned over this same toilet not three weeks ago. Had it only been three weeks?

He should press the issue, right here, right now. Will had to be familiar with the psychology of what he was experiencing, the psycho bull shit as it were. Will had internalized a lot. Daniel should have noted the absence of meat in Will’s log book. Then again, just jotting down ravioli was not all that descriptive. Daniel feels awful serving the ribs. He should have known. Of course Will was emotionally affected by food.

Eating is such a tactile activity. All the senses are engaged. Taste and smell can evoke memories in ways the other senses do not. Will's memories were never far from his conscious existence at any given time. The consistency of cooked flesh on his tongue and the act of ripping tender strips of meat from bone had taken him away from the table on the patio to someplace else. Someplace Daniel could not begin to imagine.

Knowing what it was he had been eating in Lecter's dining room, contributing to the meals himself, and yet finding them flavorful and delicious had to have been utterly bizarre. A mind bending experience Daniel cannot fathom. Will was supposed to pretend he liked the cuisine, but Daniel wonders how much Will had been pretending.

Will knows. This is why he throws up. Daniel swallows the bitter saliva under his tongue. He thinks he might get sick. Will stares at him, storm clouds obliterating the blue like ink spilling from a fountain pen. That look of his is pretty disquieting. Challenging even.

Daniel looks down at his feet, thinks he might just break out the sausage for breakfast anyway. See what kind of reaction that provokes in Will. What he'd really like to do… He realizes he is empathizing with Will's anger.

Instead, he raises his head to look at Will.

"The toothpaste is in the medicine cabinet. Might as well get your toothbrush and get ready for bed. We have to get up early to leave by four."

"Four? Why so early?" Will relaxes a little. The change of topic is welcomed.

"It's a good hour and a half to Sansepalcro where the hotel is, and the guide. We have to get checked in and meet him by seven. Your notes."

"Guess I forgot."

"You still feeling ok to go?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Where did you put my stuff?'

"Living room. Here, I'll show you your room and you can get settled."

Will notes the clipped tone. He is being reprimanded for his stubbornness. Will is too tired to care. He wants to sink into bed. Maybe he is tired enough to pass out this time.

Daniel guides him out and down the hall to the guest room on the right, across from his room. The room is small not much space to contain the double bed and dresser. A large throw rug covers the hardwood floor and a single window sets over the bed. There are blinds but no curtains.

"I'm across the hall. There's another floor, but I don't go up there in summer. It's mostly storage and a work room."

"Hobbies?'

"Weights. It's nice and cold up there in winter. The basement is too damp."

Daniel pauses before clasping Will's shoulder. "You know where everything is, just make yourself at home. Bella is in her crate and Cara is already in her bed."

“I thought she sleeps with you.”

“She does. It’s her bed. I just share it with her.” Daniel smiles and walks into his room, shuts the door.

Will locates his bags downstairs, unpacks what he needs, and returns to the bathroom to ready for bed. Will is stripped down and between the sheets in no time. He notices there is no clock on the dresser. He stares at the ceiling waiting to join the grey wolf in the forest of smoke and cinders.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Daniel gets a taste of Will's night life. They do manage to get on the road for their fishing trip.

Will stirs. He turns over to see Daniel. He blinks remembering where he is. Daniel switches on a light and Will is momentarily blinded.

“How’d you sleep?” Daniel asks.

Will looks him over through slits, notices the shirt; notices the sheets lay on the floor. Daniel’s empathy had evidently been effective. Perhaps too effective.

“Better than you it looks like. You changed your shirt.”

“Twice. Oh my god. How do you function?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 25

Daniel gets a taste of Will's night life. They do manage to get on the road for their fishing trip.

Daniel is awakened by the whine of Cara from the foot of the bed. He listens and hears someone shuffling up or down the stairs. After a moment he realizes it must be Will trying to be quiet in the dark.

“Will?”

“Yeah.” Will ambles to the doorway, twists the knob and peers inside. He sees Daniel’s silhouette in the window. He is leaning on one arm as he faces the door where Will stands. Cara thumps her tail next to him.

“What’s the matter?” Daniel sits up in bed, strokes Cara as she lies tucked against his leg.

“I…can’t sleep. Got a bottle of water. Sorry to wake you up.”

“You can’t sleep? Or don’t want to sleep.”

“Can’t get one past you, can I? I do want to avoid the bad dreams, but I can’t seem to sleep anyway.”

Daniel glances at his clock. It has only been an hour since they went to bed.

“I don’t have anything here to help you sleep, not that I want you taking anything but you are so resistant it would have to be pretty potent stuff. Then, you might be too groggy to get up in a few hours.” Daniel considers the situation, wipes at his eyes still heavy with sleep.

“I have stuff at my office but it would take half an hour to drive there…Did you try, you know?” Daniel makes a gesture with his hand, the meaning quite clear even in the dim light from a street lamp outside.

“No…Is that a clinical question?”

“Yes. How often do you…”

“How often do you?”

“All the time.” He squints at Will in the semi-darkness. “We all do it. Relieves tension, works almost every time. Look, it was just a question. I guess masturbating involves a little imagination and you don’t want to go there. Am I right?”

“I’m just going to take my water and go back to my room.”

Will cannot talk about this with Daniel right now. Not with him sitting there, petting the dog in his underwear, sheets crumpled in a heap at the bottom of the bed where he has kicked them. Will blinks away thoughts of another bed, blinks away thoughts of this one, too. It would be so easy to slip in beside Daniel; he wouldn’t have to stroke himself…

Will should have known the dogs would give him away. He just wants to go back to his room and wait it out until morning. A couple cups of coffee and he’ll be good to go. He does it all the time.

“Will, I know this is awkward but I have an idea.”

Daniel pats the empty side of the bed. “Climb in. See if you can sleep here. This empathy between us might actually help.”

“How do you mean?” Will’s voice comes from the darkened hallway incredulous and certainly dubious. Daniel feels a prick of…anticipation. He imagines Will biting at his lip. Daniel thinks Will is going to be disappointed. His idea is not what he is sure Will anticipates.

“Maybe this connection works during sleep. Maybe I can be a buffer, absorb some of the anxiety, enough so you can fall asleep.”

“How would that affect you?” Will thinks of his dreams.

“I have no idea. I’m curious, aren’t you? It’s an opportunity for me to help, if I can. If not, I can stop by the office in the morning; pick up something to take along.”

I was curious what would happen…

“I don’t know…”

“Let me get this straight. You chased killers for the FBI, have done some pretty fucked up things yourself but you won’t get in bed with me because it might actually help you sleep? That makes no sense.”

“Well, when you put it like that…” Will leans against the door jamb clutching his water bottle. He takes a long drink. Gestures towards Cara licking at her paws on the bed.

“What about her?’

“She’ll move, or she won’t.” Daniel says pulling the sheet back. “You know, if you had allowed your dogs in bed with you, you’d have slept better.”

Will huffs as he climbs into bed, pulls up the sheet Daniel has rescued from the bottom of the bed. He feels Cara nestled next to his leg, still lying stubbornly against Daniel. The fifty pounds of black fur does think it’s her bed.

Will feels the heat of Daniel lying next to him and he is comforted by that. He closes his eyes and mumbles a good night. He allows the smell of surf to wash over him. He can almost hear the waves lap against the shore.

“Sweet dreams.” Daniel says over his shoulder.

Daniel rolls over to face the window. He knows Will’s dreams will be anything but. He listens to Will breathe beside him. He closes his eyes wondering what wickedness will wind its way into his own dreams.

*****

“Bella! Get away from there!”

Daniel is keeping a grip on Cara’s collar while snapping his fingers at Bella. She is growling at something under the porch. Daniel has no wooden deck and no wooden porch, but he is dreaming and his house in the dream has both.

Bella whines and scratches, gnawing at the wood to get underneath. Her paws rake along the dirt and the grass. Daniel hears the cries of some animal from beneath the porch. He tries to see but no sun can get through the boards. He doesn’t like the sound of the crying. The crying causes tingles up his spine; the hairs on his neck are alive. He can hear rustling as the animal, or animals move in the darkness. He does not like this. He wants to run but he can’t leave the dogs.

The thought that something is living under his porch bothers him; and the thought of his dogs messing with it bothers him even more. The crying is more insistent now and Bella is going wild trying to get at it or them. There is definitely more than one. Cara breaks from his hold and now she too is pawing and digging at the porch.

The loss of control sends Daniel into a panic. He does not want the dogs under that porch. He moves toward them sliding onto his knees as he tugs and pulls on their collars. His efforts prove futile.

Panic erupts, he falls back legs flailing as the dogs drag something over him in their haste to get into the yard. His revulsion and terror grow as Bella shakes the misshapen thing and begins scraping it along the concrete sidewalk. Cara follows suit, both dogs growling and scraping. The noise fills Daniel’s ears. He thinks the screaming things in their mouths will bite them, give them rabies. He sits stunned on the grass watching in horror as the dogs scrape the things until fur and blood cover the pavement. He stares at the mangled remains, mute with terror.

He wakes already sitting up clutching his Tee-shirt. It is damp. He heaves, his chest tight, as he touches the mattress convincing himself it was a dream and he is awake now. Cara shifts at his feet, lays her head over his ankles. He glances at Will.

Will is on his side, facing the closet; his breathing is irregular but not panicked. He is dreaming, too. Daniel quietly gets out of bed without disturbing Will. He exchanges the damp Tee for a fresh one. He looks at the clock. It is only a few minutes past midnight. He climbs back in bed and tries to go back to sleep.

The alarm nearly sends Daniel out of bed. He slams his hand on snooze and flops back onto the bed. His shirt is again damp. The air conditioning is cranked up to its highest setting and yet the room feels close, warm and ripe with the smell of sleep and sweat.

Will stirs. He turns over to see Daniel. He blinks remembering where he is. Daniel switches on a light and Will is momentarily blinded.

“How’d you sleep?” Daniel asks.

Will looks him over through slits, notices the shirt; notices the sheets lay on the floor. Daniel’s empathy had evidently been effective. Perhaps too effective.

“Better than you it looks like. You changed your shirt.”

“Twice. Oh my god. How do you function?”

“Not easily. Bad dreams?”

“Yeah. Whatever you were dreaming had an effect on me. Your emotions caused my subconscious to create my own nightmares.” Daniel pauses, considering the effects on Will. “But you slept better didn’t you? I mean you were able to actually fall asleep.”

“Yes, and pretty quickly too.” Will stretches and moves to sit up. He is not prepared to entertain the implications this early in the morning. He cannot consider sleeping with Daniel all the time. For plenty of reasons. Not the least of which is Daniel’s rest is disturbed, quite a lot.

Daniel mulls the implications over in his head. He stands up and turns off the alarm before it can go off again. They have to get ready and get on the road. This exchange, this connection between them invites a lot of possibilities. Possibilities that do not all focus on therapy. But, there are psychiatric applications. Daniel has to convince Will to finally talk about his dreams.

Dreams are a tool of psychology. Dreaming or the lack of dreaming has an effect on consciousness, on daily living. In Will’s case, his subconscious is linked so closely with his conscious that his dreams would be incredibly revealing. The fact that he keeps them close like his favorite emotions, tells Daniel quite a lot.

“I think most everything got packed last night. I’ll put on some coffee while you get dressed and ready. I’ll throw some stuff in the cooler and we’ll hit the road.”

“Sounds good.” Will stumbles into the bathroom first, listens to Daniel descend down the steps, Cara in tow, panting at his heels. He’ll have to take the dogs out, too. Will turns on the light. He stares at his toothbrush hanging in its ceramic holder and remembers another toothbrush, the holder shiny and metallic, he smells the scent of sandalwood.

Will sits in the comfortable leather seat of Daniel’s Mercedes. They are speeding south along on the A1 toward Arezzo. Then they will turn east to Sansepalcro where the Hotel Podere Violino is situated on the Tevere and its tail waters where he and Daniel will be fishing a few hours from now.

His initial enthusiasm had lessened somewhat, the unfamiliarity of the place dislodging him from his comfort zone, but he was still looking forward to an afternoon of peace and near quiet. He would not be alone, but being with Daniel was the next best thing. He often retreats to the stream in his mind, casting his lures, watching them float along the currents of sun dappled water. And then he hears the screech of a bird, an eagle, and its winged shadow blocks out the shimmering waters of his dreams.

Today, he will experience a very real stream in Italian waters running from Tuscany to Umbria and without the shrieking specter that stalks him.

The traffic is light given it is still very early on a Saturday morning, the sun still lurks beneath the horizon. He has been gazing out the window even though it is too dark to see anything, but he knows his lack of engagement will signal to Daniel he is not in the mood to be social.

Daniel cannot ignore the avoidant behavior. When Will wants to make a point he is not subtle. Will even wore his glasses to underscore how badly he needs time to think, to be alone with his thoughts. They have driven in silence save for the radio tuned to a local music station and turned down low.

Daniel has not attempted to lure Will out of his mind. They have the entire weekend. He wonders if that is what occupies Will’s thoughts. If the prospect of being alone together is causing the anxiety he feels from him. Getting sick all over his bathroom had embarrassed him. Sharing a bed in order to sleep had not set well with him. Discovering that he had slept better in Daniel’s bed had not seemed to please him either. Daniel can only wonder how many affronts to his dignity Will has suffered over the past year. He supposes tossing up his dinner barely registers. There are simply too many unpleasant things Will could be thinking about.

He considers asking Will to remove his glasses, but Will isn’t using them as a crutch as much as a means of communicating. He knows Daniel knows he doesn’t actually need them to see. Daniel knows he uses them to not see. Will does not want to be inundated with Daniel’s emotions this morning either.

Daniel takes another drink of coffee followed by a chaser of water. He takes out his pack of cigarettes from the console and lights up, exhales the smoke and rests him arm along the open window so he can enjoy the rush of wind on his face.

Will glances over, sniffs at the air as the smoke fills his nostrils. He cracks his window.

He watches Daniel smoke out of the corner of his eye. They have been on the road for about half an hour. In that time Daniel has munched through a granola bar, a pear, and a bag of trail mix. He had not finished the pear since it had slipped from his fingers and had rolled back under the seat.

“Wanna get that?” he had asked Will while licking juice off his fingers.

Will had merely stared back and returned his attentions to the window. Only then he had allowed himself to grin. The pear remains under Daniel’s seat.

Then, Daniel had alternately sipped at coffee, applied chap-stick, and gulped down a bottle of water. This was his second cigarette. Will wonders how much more food, drink, and cigarettes it will take to satisfy Daniel’s compulsions. He thinks there are enough snacks in the cooler and cigarettes to last the entire trip.

“That’s quite the oral fixation you have there.” Will says, finally turning away from the window to look at Daniel directly. He is immediately sorry he said anything at all.

Daniel’s’ hand pauses mid-way to his mouth. He runs his tongue along his teeth contemplating what he should say in response. He wraps his lips around the tip of the cigarette, takes a long thoughtful drag while Will waits.

“I like putting things in my mouth.” He says as he exhales making a point of not looking at Will. He can feel Will’s gaze as clearly as he can feel the amusement and the affection. He does not have to look to know Will is chewing on his lip again, prey to his own fixation.

“This is a fishing trip, right?” Will adjusts his legs pushing against the seat to lean back.

“Of course. Therapy. Wonder what we’ll catch, huh?”

Daniel flicks the cigarette out the window and lifts his coffee to his lips. He turns up the radio. Will watches the sun coming up across the Tuscan fields of olive groves and sunflowers. He thinks Daniel should be more careful with his emotions. Unless, he is prepared to act on them.

Will can appreciate the irony. He has to be in therapy to get any.

Chapter End Notes

I know the fishing trip has elicited some degree of expectation. It's coming...pardon the pun.

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Du Maurier engages in a little mischief. While the boys are away, the snake can play...

Clayton's room is the only room left. As she steps inside, Du Maurier smiles as she realizes she has hit pay dirt. The bed is a mess. Two sets of boxers and several tee-shirts hang askew over the hamper. The closet has been left wide open in their hurry to leave early this morning. She notes the black hair of the smaller dog all over the bed. She wrinkles her nose. Boys…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 26

Du Maurier engages in a little mischief. While the boys are away, the snake can play...

Du Maurier sits on a stone wall across and down from Daniel's house pretending to read a tourist magazine. She wears a head scarf to protect her face from the sun and from scrutiny.

Fiesole is a tourist attraction for those seeking a respite from the crowds of Florence. Florence relies on its tourists. There are enough of them strolling about on their way to the ruins and the museum at the very top of this hill.

She had finished her antipasto last evening, feeling much better after coating her stomach in something besides caffeine and alcohol. Before she had slipped into the back seat of the town car, she had made some helpful observations. Observations that will assist her today.

She had observed the boys, as she now likes to refer to Clayton and Graham, packing gear and duffle bags into the trunk. She had watched Clayton give instructions and a key to the neighbor living two doors down as Graham had played fetch with the dogs in the driveway. She had observed the boys clearing the mess from the table and grill, performing a little dance as they avoided actually touching each other. There was something going on between them, but she could not quite put a finger on it.

By necessity, she had been too far away to discern much more. More curious, she had also watched Graham bolt into the house, Clayton right behind him.

The boys had turned out the lights shortly thereafter.

They are clearly going on an overnight- trip to leave the dogs. The neighbor's services are the reason Du Maurier sits waiting with her tourist bag and brochure. Eventually, the pleasant looking Italian woman with the dark curls down her back and the form fitting capris will come by to feed and water the dogs and more importantly take them for a walk, disengaging the security system before she takes them out.

Du Maurier can slip inside and be gone without being noticed. She knows the woman will wait until the sun is no longer overhead to walk the dogs. She has timed her surveillance in anticipation of a late afternoon walk. The pretty little Italian will want to take out the dogs while the shadows are long, but not too late to interrupt her own plans for the evening.

It is almost five-thirty when she comes. She unlocks the front door, steps inside to the sound of barking, and moves to the wall where the security panel must be. Soon, she is out the door again trailing behind the dogs, leashes taut as she struggles to control them.

Du Maurier glances around before approaching the drive. She walks quickly, the scarf and grey jacket billowing in her wake. As she steps inside she is greeted by a very pleasantly decorated living room adorned with prints, bookshelves, and rustic pieces of furniture that complement the aged structure. Clayton has excellent taste in décor .

She notes the piano in the corner, a baby grand, old, but oiled, and she already knows, tuned. His violin case rests beside the bench. She reminds herself she does not have time to indulge. She walks swiftly to the kitchen, sees the multitude of sticky notes and receipts stuck to the refrigerator with magnets.

All too easy. Graham's address and phone number are written in block letters on a note at eye level. She takes a picture with her cell phone. The kitchen is tidy; the colors are a little too dark for her taste and it feels very masculine like the rest of the house. It is not Spartan, but a definite functional aesthetic dominates. She does not have time to ruminate further. There is one more room she wants to see before she makes her exit.

She reaches the top of the stairs and finds a small room, clearly the guest room. Graham must have slept here but perhaps not for long by the looks of the bed. It barely looks slept in. The bathroom is also tidy and smells vaguely of vomit. An air freshener sits on the toilet. The toilet is clean; but that smell is unmistakable. She decides this must be because there is no window.

Clayton's room is the only room left. As she steps inside, Du Maurier smiles as she realizes she has hit pay dirt. The bed is a mess. Two sets of boxers and several tee-shirts hang askew over the hamper. The closet has been left wide open in their hurry to leave early this morning. She notes the black hair of the smaller dog all over the bed. She wrinkles her nose. Boys…

Du Maurier walks down Via Fra Giovanni and waves to the pretty Italian woman walking Clayton's dogs as she passes by. She clicks on her phone and reviews the photos she took of the fridge and the bedroom. Her eyes flicker as she rereads the address. Of course Graham lives there. He is ten minutes, if that, from the Palazzo Pitti, the Vasari Corridor, and Hannibal.

She has to move quickly while they are gone. The boys will not be returning this evening, but they will Sunday evening. Clayton has patients Monday. She wonders which day Graham has his appointment. She imagines Clayton sees him more often than once a week.

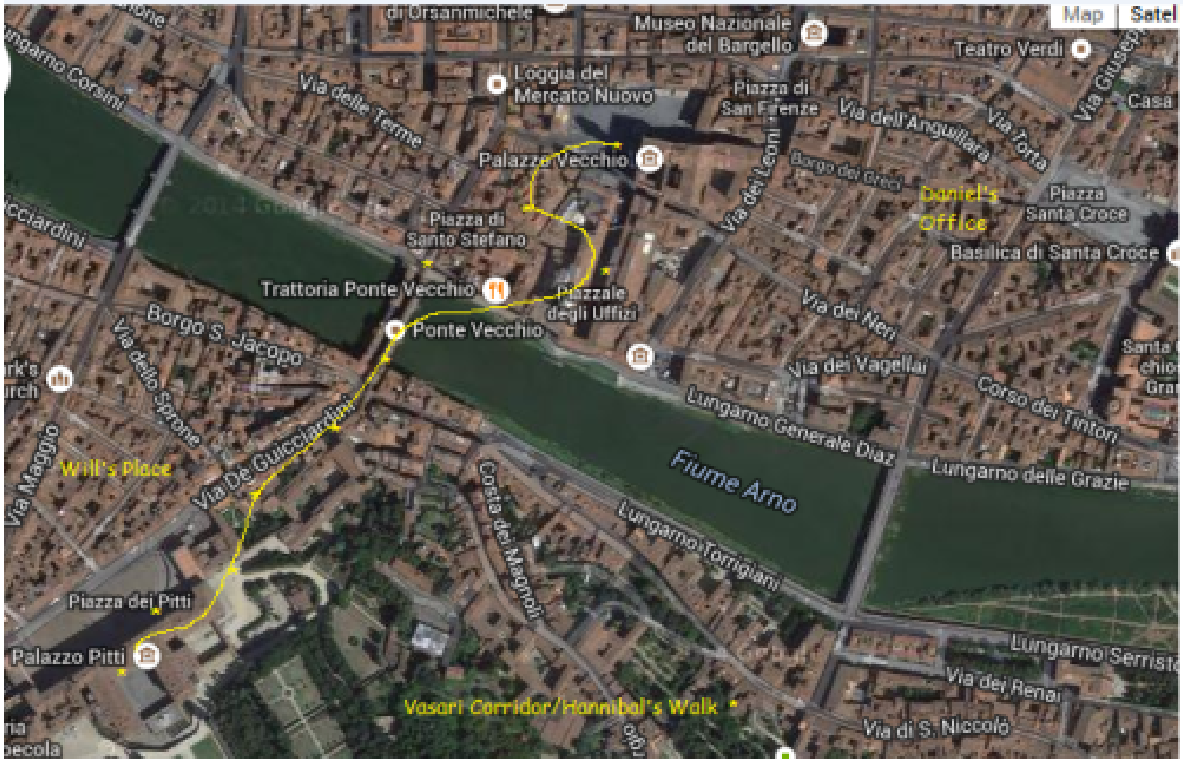
Clayton has no idea what he has gotten himself into with Graham. No matter what Graham has divulged in their *therapy* Clayton cannot imagine the dynamic between Graham and Hannibal. When he does, it will be too late.

She strips off the jacket and tosses it into someone's trash. She can't have Graham anywhere near Clayton's office. She can't have him living so close to the Vasari Corridor. Hannibal spends far too much at the Palazzo Pitti to risk a chance sighting of Graham.

She throws her head back to shake off the scarf. Her blonde tresses fall along her shoulders, brush against her bare back. She stuffs the scarf into another trash receptacle. She feels liberated.

After this weekend, it won't matter which days Graham has appointments. It won't matter if Hannibal camps out at Palazzo Pitti. Graham is about to have a change of residence.

Du Maurier texts her driver to come and pick her up. She has shopping to do. At the hardware store.


Map
Satel
di Orsanmichele
Museo Nazionale del Bargello
Teatro Verdi
Lungarno Corsini
Via delle Terme
Loggia del Mercato Nuovo
Piazza di San Firenze
Via dell'Anguillara
Via Torta
Palazzo Vecchio
Borgo dei Greci
Daniel's Office
Piazza Santa Croce
Basilica di Santa Croce
Via dei Leoni
Piazza di Santo Stefano
Trattoria Ponte Vecchio
Piazzale degli Uffizi
Ponte Vecchio
Via dei Neri
Borgo S. Jacopo
Via dello Sprone
Via dei Vagellai
Corso dei Tintori
Lungarno Generale Diaz
Via De Guicciardini
Will's Place
Via Maggio
Fiume Arno
Lungarno delle Grazie
Costa dei Magnoli
Lungarno Torrigiani
Piazza dei Pitti
Palazzo Pitti
Lungarno Serristori
Via dei Renai
Vasari Corridor/Hannibal's Walk
Via di S. Niccolò

Map of Florence where Will, Hannibal, Daniel, and Bedelia kill, eat, and love.

Chapter End Notes

The map (thanks Google) shows approximate locations of where the characters go in the story. Daniel's home in Fiesole would be seven to ten miles north east. On this map that would be north of the Palazzo Vecchio. Hannibal's home in Impruneta would be ten miles west of Will's place. Bedelia's home in Siena would be forty five miles south of Will's place. Hannibal lives forty miles from Bedelia. Hope this helps visualize the distances and the area.

Of course I reserve the right to transport my characters across time and space just like Bryan Fuller does.

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Daniel and Will spend the day fishing but eventually they have to return to their hotel suite.

Daniel already knows what Will needs. Has known for a while now. In order for Daniel to do what he does best, Will needs to be intimate with his instincts for Daniel, with Daniel. With his empathy, Daniel will draw more from the intimacy than even Hannibal, and Hannibal had been able to infer quite a lot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

trevere river hotel

Chapter 27

Podere Violino used to be a huge estate with an enormous barn and several other smaller buildings all constructed of wood and ancient stone. The buildings have been renovated and the grounds are landscaped so they blend with the natural beauty that surrounds the Tevere. It is five minutes from the tail waters where they fished today.

Will had found the Tevere remarkably similar to his favorite fishing spot at home. There were more coniferous varieties of trees than he was used to, but a stream is a stream wherever you go.

He shares a suite with Daniel; they have adjoining rooms and share a bathroom, doors from either side. Their rooms are on the first floor, they are not large but they are lavished in comforts.

Daniel is probably asleep by now, in his bed, in his room. He had even passed up wine with dinner saying he would fall asleep in his plate. Will had not doubted him. He had readied himself for bed immediately after dinner but not before thanking Will for having the sense to book a room. He had apologized for not stopping by his office for sleep medication and made it clear that Will was welcome to join him if he had trouble sleeping again.

Will had not mentioned that he had not remembered the medication either.

Will had nodded and closed his door on both Daniel and the idea. Associations formed quickly as did habits.

Daniel had not bothered to phone the main desk for a wake-up call either. Unless he had done so after retiring to his own room, but Will doubted it.

Will supposed he was not concerned about what time they returned in the morning, or afternoon for that matter. Will was not concerned either. There was nothing he had to rush back for.

His laptop was waiting for him on his desk in the little flat back in Florence. Daniel had reiterated this was therapy. No work. He had not brought any either. Will had carried his cell with him, but he needn't have bothered. It hadn't rung all day. He's not sure how he feels about that.

Will rubs at his eyes, leans his head back against the polished wood of the headboard. He is tired and he should slip down beneath the comforter, but he knows what awaits him in the darkness of his dreams. He closes his eyes preferring to let his mind take him back over the day.

Daniel is much more at home in the hotel than he had been trapesing through woods and swatting at insects. Will had averted his head many times so Daniel would not see him vacillating between something akin to satisfaction at watching Daniel struggle with the great outdoors and compassion for him. Will is not ungrateful; he knows the trip was for him. And, after a couple hours, it was abundantly clear the trip was not for Daniel.

He had tried to tell Daniel what to expect, but Daniel had been unconcerned until reality had slapped him in the face. Daniel had the mosquito bites to prove it. Will chuckles aloud. He had remarked to Daniel that he must be very tasty.

Daniel had responded that since the bugs weren't biting Will, what did that say about him?

Will had let Daniel go first in the shower. He'd hardly had a choice. Daniel had tossed his baggage on his bed and begun unbuttoning his shirt and kicking off his boots as soon as he'd shut the door. He had not given a second thought to Will standing there, gear and bag still in his hands.

Daniel could not wait to strip off the wet clothes that smelled of fish and stream and sweat. All day he had been affable as always, but Will could tell that it would be a while before Daniel stepped in a stream wearing boots and overalls again. He had tripped over his own feet on his way to the bathroom in his unabashed glee at returning to civilization.

Learning how to tie off the lures and cast the rods had not been difficult for him, he learned quickly and was coordinated enough that he hadn't sent the bait flying too far downstream or flung it at Will or their guide. Will had enjoyed teaching him, had enjoyed watching him experiment until he found a stance and casting style that worked for him. Will had especially enjoyed the closeness; of being able to stand quietly next to him without the need to fill the air with words.

Will was learning that they often didn't need words. They communicated quite well without them. He had smelled ocean and sand all day despite standing in the fresh water stream. Daniel's mist had again soothed him, a spray that came and went like a breeze across his face.

Their guide, Dominic, or Dom as he preferred, talked with Daniel in rapid fire Italian, too rapid for Will to keep up. Daniel addressed that right away. Apparently, Daniel told the gregarious Dom that Will was some kind of American fishing expert, with his own tv show, and remarked how it was shame Dom had never seen it. Dom had warmed up to him considerably. Dom spoke in English for Will and the two of them had enthused over the finer points of fly fishing.

Daniel had graciously and intentionally bowed out, allowing Dom and Will to monopolize the conversation. Dom and Will had monopolized the fish, too. Even though the air temperature had been near ninety degrees, the stream remained cool and the fish had run all day. Between them, they caught nearly two dozen trout and half a dozen grayling.

Daniel had been able to catch fish, reel them in, but they slipped away every time he tried to wrestle out the hook, all but one. He had pointed to his lone six pound trout and joked he was going to mount it.

They had let most of them go.

They had the option of cooking the remaining fish themselves, but as soon as Daniel understood that meant cleaning the trout and watching them cook over open flames while sitting around a campfire, he had almost whined in protest.

Will had stood with feet apart, smoothing his whiskers as he had faced Daniel on the bank, feigning indecision. Will had enjoyed watching Daniel pace in front of him trying to gage Will, pleading his case with large green eyes.

Will had relinquished the trout into the care of one of the sous chefs, even leaving the choice of entrée to her. She had promised they would absolutely love it, gushing over Will despite the wedding ring on her finger. Daniel was already halfway down the hall by the time Will had finished speaking with her.

Daniel had not been too tired to eat the excellent meal promised by the sous chef. Will usually enjoyed pan frying his catch in his well-seasoned skillet with only butter, salt and pepper. He would have liked cooking over a campfire. There was nothing quite so delicious as freshly caught trout cooked crisp outside so the white flakes of flesh melted on the tongue. He wonders if his skillet is still tucked under the center island where he left it.

Dinner this evening had been a treat far beyond Will's simple preparation. *Trout Picasso,* she had called it. The trout had been grilled and covered with cubes of assorted seasonal melons and a sauce so delectable that both Daniel and Will had cleaned their plates, literally.

Will calculates the cost of the river trip package then adds the rented rods, the guide fee, the licenses, the river fee, and the rooms. Will had used his VISA for the reservations but Daniel had proactively taken care of the rest, probably right after Will had given him the information. He hopes Daniel intends to bill Mason for all of it.

Daniel had been tired, that was true. Unlike Will, he was not accustomed to being sleep deprived and running on fumes of caffeine and adrenaline. But he had tried to make it through the day despite how fatigued he was. He had done it for Will.

He had given Will the gift of living in the moment, of being present and aware of only the stream and the fish. No dreams. No Hannibal. It is a gift Will finds most precious.

Will has had a good day. And he has Daniel to thank for it. Will would have never put the trip together himself. Daniel had to prescribe it, call it therapy for Will to do it. He admits that Daniel handles him pretty well. He has known Daniel for only a month yet it seems far longer than that. The empathy helps. Will doubts they would have this relationship without it. There is a balance to it that agrees with Will, a reciprocity rarely achieved in his experience and that too is precious.

Will resists and Daniel persists, like the ocean tide splashing upon the shore, breaking against the sand, receding only to return again. Will thinks he should stop resisting.

You are alone because you are unique.

Daniel is alone, also. And, in Will's experience, Daniel qualifies as pretty damned unique. This balance they have achieved is unique. Will does not want to upset the balance but balance is static and relationships are not static. Daniel has already crossed his professional boundaries for Will. He keeps crossing boundaries in order to preserve the balance knowing that at some point it will tip; one way or the other.

And yet, his ocean continues to break gently upon the shore while Will stands with feet firmly planted in the sand.

Will has allowed him in, but only so far. Daniel's mist envelops his mind, but does not penetrate it. Will knows it could. Daniel would feel every emotion exactly as Will feels it. He would know how every thought, every word, every touch felt to Will. Will could let Daniel know him, see him.

He sounds like Hannibal. Will's jaw tightens at the thought.

I have let you know me, see me. I gave you a rare gift – but you did not want it…

Hannibal's words sift through his mind as they always do. Strangled words spilling from a mouth stripped of its tenderness. Will sits up straighter in his bed, shoulders against the carved oak headboard and his head angled at the ceiling. His stomach still gurgles pleasantly, full of the trout and wine from dinner. He presses a hand to his stomach, allows his fingers to wander lower to caress the scar beneath his shirt.

He doesn't mind so much that the scar is so noticeable; that it mars his otherwise smooth skin, that the sight of it still surprises him. It's not the ugliness of it that he minds.

He remembers Hannibal touching him there, before.

A favorite indulgence of Hannibal's, to trace his fingers along Will's body, his eyes taking note of every tremor, every hitch of breath. Will remembers the caress of Hannibal's lips there warm and wet against his flesh, tongue sliding on his skin while strong smooth hands grasped his hips, thumbs gently pressing drawing the softest of hisses. How readily his body had succumbed to Hannibal's attentions. Hannibal had only to draw his thumb across that tender expanse of pale flesh below the navel to lift Will off the mattress, to stay Hannibal's hand and keep it there.

Hannibal was always aware of Will, as though Will were an extension of self. No sigh escaped Will's lips that Hannibal did not notice, no movement of his body too subtle for Hannibal to miss.

It is the knowledge that he cannot ever touch this scar or look at it without remembering how it got there that Will minds. That he cannot separate the pleasure from the pain.

As Hannibal intended. To wound Will; to hurt Will as Will had hurt him had not been enough. To punish Will with his empathy, knowing Will's mind would absorb Hannibal's pain as well as his own had not been enough.

He had to taunt Will as well. So that life, should Will choose life, would be forever marked by Hannibal. He had branded Will physically as though the searing damage to his mind was somehow an insufficient keepsake. Will has only to run his fingers over his ruined flesh to be reminded of him. Hannibal touches him still.

Still violent.

Still intimate.

Caressed with a blade.

The Ravenstag of his dreams had been born out of Will's subconscious blending of Hobbs and the copy-cat, with his empathy he had created a hybrid in an effort to reconcile what his conscious mind could not. Will knows his mind had created the Ravenstag, had connected him to Hannibal. Sometimes, it had merged with Hannibal, the malevolent antler headed monster of his dreams. And so, it had circled the fringes of his dreamscape while he had played the lure with Hannibal and it had finally lay dying on the floor of Hannibal's kitchen as Will had lain in his own blood, the blood of so many on his hands.

But, Will had not waded into the quiet of the stream and neither had the Ravenstag.

It had accompanied him to Italy. Will is no longer haunted by Hobbs or the copy-cat or even the Chesapeake Ripper. He has new specters to haunt him. The Ravenstag has served its purpose. He knows the large black eagle with the serpent's tail and red rimmed eyes is a creature created in his subconscious but its significance is eluding him this time. As Hannibal is eluding him.

He has always thought in images. Images accompanied by sound, by smell, by touch and taste. By raw emotion. The eagle is Will's subconscious at work, mining the forts in his skull for substance to guide him, but the destination remains a mystery. He knows the thing that squirms beneath the scar and the eagle are connected to Hannibal. He just doesn't know how.

Perhaps as he learns more about Hannibal's past, his dreams will shift as the Hannibal in his imagination shifts.

The room is cooler now and Will slips beneath the scratchy hotel comforter, pulls it up over his shoulders, rolls to his side to stare at the curtains. Hotel comforters are always scratchy it seems. Will decides he sleeps in hotels too often if he is even thinking this much about comforters.

Sleep beckons but Will stubbornly retreats to his stream, he thinks of Winston, the only one of his dogs to ever accompany him into the stream of his dreams.

Will lifts his head from the pillow with a jolt. He is not alone with the eagle either. The wolf is always with him, white and wary at first but now, it is grey and protective as Will trudges through the burnt and tortured landscape he inhabits when he closes his eyes.

Will remembers the wolf had materialized out of the mist in a dream following his initial meeting with Daniel. The landscape had been crisp clean everything covered in white snow, even the Ravenstag had succumbed to the frost bearing mist. Will had plummeted into drifts of snow as ice crystals had rained down upon him.

Will has charted his own path out of the forest of white and into the dead place he finds himself night after night. And the wolf has come with him, has stayed with him even through the Ravenstag's departure and the arrival of the serpent tailed eagle.

I feel like I've dragged you into my world.

I got here on my own. But I enjoy the company.

Will has dragged Daniel into his world, and it would seem; his dreams. *I enjoy your company too much. And what does that say about me?* Daniel has been a willing companion, venturing into unknown territory for his patient's sake.

Will knows how Daniel thinks, can put himself in Daniel's mind. He can see himself through Daniel's eyes, just as he could with Hannibal. Daniel believes in second chances. He believes no act is irredeemable. He believes he can help Will navigate through his storms, not as a compass, but as ballast. He has become the ready anchor when Will needs one. He is willing to be more than that.

He sees both the best and the worst in Will.

I need to know what you have been through so that together, we can ascertain what it is that you need and…if I am qualified to provide it.

Daniel already knows what Will needs. Has known for a while now. In order for Daniel to do what he does best, Will needs to be intimate with his instincts for Daniel, with Daniel. With his empathy, Daniel will draw more from the intimacy than even Hannibal, and Hannibal had been able to infer quite a lot.

Hannibal has manipulated Will's mind to such a degree that Will thinks Hannibal might know him better than he knows himself and that thought truly frightens.

But Daniel has not fabricated events. Daniel has not dulled his mental defenses nor chipped away at his resistance.

Daniel said he would not prescribe any drugs or engage in any therapy without Will's knowledge or permission. Ever cognizant of the fine lines they have drawn between doctor and patient, Daniel will not cross this line or he risks Will equating him with Hannibal. Daniel waits for Will's permission.

Will's eyes flick to the door. He thinks what a long walk it is to that door. He knows if he walks through it, he will not be returning to this bed.

Chapter End Notes

Podere Violino is a real resort hotel situated on the Tevere River. I loosely based the fishing trip around the area but I had to research the fly fishing.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Will gets intimate with his instincts. Daniel is REALLY pleased with the therapy.

The mad kissing resumes as feet kick and legs entwine. Friction. Heat. Movement inviting sparks that crackle between them like flint striking rock. The promise of shattering completely.

Chapter 28

Will gets intimate with his instincts. Daniel is REALLY pleased with the therapy.

Will stands in the bathroom that separates his room from Daniel's, separates his life into before and after once again. He stares at his reflection bathed in the soft amber glow of the night light and wonders how he can appear no different and yet his entire being feels like it has been rearranged. Changed.

Rebirths can only ever be symbolic

You've been reborn.

Wasn't that the goal of your therapy?

Will wants to be with Daniel. He wants to surrender to the mist that sinks into his consciousness every time Daniel is near; so that it binds him and saturates every pore. Last night as he had lain in Daniel's bed, he had drifted in an entire ocean of that mist. That his own unrelenting compulsions had been overridden by the balm of Daniel's mist had surprised him.

He had not meant to wake Daniel up but he should have known the dogs would. Before getting the bottle of water downstairs, he had tossed and turned, unused to the feel of the guest bed and the smells of Daniel's house. There had been too much to process from the evening's events. Too much in Daniel's house left twisting around in his mind to distract him.

Daniel would have surmised this after watching Will comb through his office over the past few weeks.

Daniel has been gradually introducing Will to his life outside of his practice. Daniel had wanted the trip to provide the context for an initial encounter between them. A neutral location. Equally new and unknown to both of them. A place with no associations other than the ones they would impart to it, the memories they would create there.

Daniel does not want external stimuli to compound the internal. There is enough of that already. Will cannot ignore it and Daniel knows this. He has tried to arrange the most conducive environment he could manage for them.

Daniel has patiently allowed Will to warm to the idea of intimacy with him. The balance Will feels, the trust Daniel has engendered has all been leading to this. Daniel has been preparing Will for this, rather allowing Will to prepare himself.

When did Daniel become so wise?

Will exhales slowly as he turns the doorknob. His skin prickles with the blast of crisp air from Daniel's room. Will tells himself he shivers because of the air conditioning. Daniel lies wrapped in shadows cast from the lamplight outside. He has left the curtains open so that a seam of light slices over the bed.

So like Daniel to reject the darkness in favor of the morning sun.

Daniel wakes to movement beside him, a rustling of sheets, a dip in the mattress and weight settling, quietly shifting. He squints in the near darkness to find Will has slipped between the sheets and comforter. He shifts his body away from the middle to allow Will more space.

As he relaxes his body once again he feels a prick against the skin of his calf. Will must have nipped his leg. He shifts his position again. Feels the scrape of toenail again, more insistent this time.

"What are you doing?" Daniel mumbles, clinging to sleep.

"Poking your leg…with my toe." Will's voice is quiet as he states a matter of fact.

"Well, stop it."

Daniel groans, stretches his legs and cracks his ankles preparing to sink back into sleep when he feels warmth spreading below. It takes him a second to process the sudden familiar warmth and why he is feeling it. He turns to Will who is gazing at him from his pillow, blankets gathered at his waist.

"You…you don't…" Daniel is no longer squinting, but wide eyed and quite awake. He reaches out his hand to roam over Will's naked chest.

"…don't have…any clothes on." Will finishes for him as he reaches a hand up to grasp Daniel's neck and pull him closer. He presses his lips against Daniel's. Daniel bends to him, opens his mouth to receive what the alcohol robbed him of last time. His hands find Will's face, he strokes lightly along Will's cheeks and Will's mouth widens in response.

Will's kisses are deep and searching, Daniel feels the hunger, the need in Will for the solace he seeks. Need flows from Will and each press of lips bring with it an ache Daniel knows all too well. He feels the throb twine across his stomach; the wound Will will not allow to heal.

The wound Lecter inflicted has become self-inflicted. By design.

Daniel holds Will in a close embrace their lips locked together, Will's body and mind in a place he can manage. He runs his hands through Will's hair, enjoying the thickness as it glides through his fingers, notices the slight relaxing of Will's shoulders. The rhythmic massaging of finger tips on his scalp soothes away the furrowed brows, releases the awkward tension of legs still coiled concealed beneath the blankets that remain bunched about his waist.

Embarrassed he is here in the bed with Daniel. Even more so that he is without any clothes. Despite being the one who removed them in the first place.

Daniel thinks again what a contradiction Will is.

Will keeps his eyes shut. He needs to so he can focus. So he can take the mouth Daniel offers and savor the delicious ripple that sucking on his tongue sends directly to his cock. He rolls his hips as his cock swells under the comforter already too warm and close for comfort.

As Will's body grinds against him, Daniel feels the pulse of blood quicken in his limbs and rush to his groin, balls tight and cock stretching against the fabric of his boxers that presents such a thin yet frustrating barrier between them. The clothes have to go.

He pulls away. Will sighs as the withdrawal of Daniel's lips leaves him sucking air.

"What?"

"Shirt."

Daniel struggles to remove his tee encumbered by the comforter and the insufferable weight and heat of it. He flips the mountain of fabric from his body and sits up. He can't believe Will hasn't tossed the blankets himself.

Daniel reaches for the comforter and flings it aside, kicks it off the bed completely. Will glances at it on the floor for a second his fingers still grasping the sheet at his side. Daniel smiles at this. Will can keep his security blanket for now.

Daniel tugs his shirt off, lets it drop to the floor. His sun kissed skin has a luster to it in the dim light and his body feels perfect and smooth as he slips between the sheets to gather Will in his arms again. He wants Will to remove the boxers, wants Will to rip them from him in the worst way.

The mad kissing resumes as feet kick and legs entwine. Friction. Heat. Movement inviting sparks that crackle between them like flint striking rock. The promise of shattering completely.

Slow, Will thinks, *slow or you'll hurt him.* But need beckons; it nips, it bites.

Will is consuming his mouth still. Daniel likes being consumed. Will likes kissing. His entire body comes alive, a thermic reaction like striking a match. His mouth ignites the rest of him. Daniel decides Will's mouth was made for kissing.

Will is beside himself. Daniel tastes as warm and sweet as before, a tingle of mouthwash upon his lips instead of whiskey. Will hears gulls and echoes of waves breaking upon the shore. He feels his body loosen, give in to the warm hand that grips his neck and holds him close.

He struggles against the impulse to sink his teeth into the wet lips that graze at the corner of his mouth.

Daniel threads a handful of curly locks around his fingers. Will inclines his head, eyes closed as he folds into Daniel's hand. Daniel nudges his knee between Will's legs and smiles into Will's mouth, laughing a little as Will's thighs widen then close again tensing around the knee that presses pleasantly into his balls.

Daniel allows Will that sensation a moment before clenching the curls he holds tightly drawing the silky strands into his fist. He twists his hand around and tugs hard for good measure. Will pauses, his body stills. Daniel watches him draw breath sharply through open moist lips, waiting.

Will opens his eyes and he knows Daniel knows. Will is truly naked now.

“Fuck. I can’t let him go.” Will whispers into Daniel’s neck, “Even for this. He will still be here.”

Will pulls away, a tortured expression on his face. He rubs his knuckles compulsively along his chin, his eyes betray how wounded he is. Will turns his head to stare at the ceiling, to gather his thoughts. This is still so new, this…whatever it is has Will’s nerves on edge, jangling sharp like broken glass in his head.

Violence. Intimacy. A circle.

Impulses can be controlled with restraint and conquered with…obedience.

“Will…”

Daniel’s chest tightens at the wince Will gives him. He knew he would not be alone with Will but it bothers him just the same. There is purpose in it, however unwelcome. He looks at Will in profile beside him. Beautiful, even like this, still wretchedly beautiful.

Lecter had seduced the killer in Will through manipulation; why not seduce latent desires from him? Lecter had quite simply left nothing to chance regarding Will. At least that was the intention.

Daniel sighs, offers Will an indulgent smile. “Isn’t it fitting then, that you share him with me?”

“Daniel…”

Will looks aside, the very idea troubles him. His brows furrow with the inhale of breath and he parts his lips to speak but thinks better of it and exhales instead, defeated before they have even begun.

“Will, you can’t help it. You can’t control your empathy standing up, why would I think you can control it lying down?”

“I feel…transparent.” Will talks to the ceiling.

“Look, if he has to be here, don’t let him spoil it. I was counting on his company.”

Will lifts his head, eyes wide. Of course Daniel anticipated this. Daniel strokes his cheek and pulls him close. “Don’t think about it. Just try to stay in the moment, with me. I’ll remind you if start to drift.”

Will extricates himself from Daniel, rolls his head back to rest against the pillows, sighs and nods in resignation. He reminds himself this is therapy. This is what therapy has become for him. This… is what he has been reduced to. Will swallows the bitterness and it burns like acid in his stomach.

Daniel eases up a little along the mattress, props himself on his elbow to look down at Will. Daniel feels the poison beginning to well up.

“Ever the patient.” Will continues to stare up at the ceiling. Chews at his lower lip.

Daniel pauses, sees the hurt Will is blinking back. Feels the stinging in his own eyes. Understands. He decides quickly what Will needs.

“Would you rather call me…doctor?”

Daniel has barely asked his question before he feels himself slammed onto the mattress. He looks up at Will, lips pursed, eyes mischievous and wide in the stripe of light.

“You are as crazy as I am. Saying something like that, to me.” A smile blooms regardless.

The poison dissipates for the moment. Will flops back down and reclines beside Daniel. He buries his head between Daniel’s neck and shoulder. He wants…he wants…he wants what he cannot have.

Will needs time to pull himself together. Daniel needs a moment, too. He cradles Will’s head, and knowing his touch calms him, allows Will to draw comfort from the touching. He strokes the hair that still hangs over the back of Will’s neck. He promised to get it cut two weeks ago. As he runs his fingers through it, Daniel is glad he didn’t.

He slides his hands over Will’s shoulders, along the arms that snake around his waist. Whatever the dynamic between them, Daniel needs to know the control buttons Lecter managed to instill in Will.

He knows what he would like to do with Will, but what he would like may not yield the insight he needs. For now he decides to allow Will’s comfort level to be his guide, to let Will do what comes naturally without the added stress of meeting expectations. Conditioned or not.

That Daniel even has Will in his bed is enough.

“Tell me what you want.” Daniel says softly into his ear.

Will uncoils himself from Daniel, lifts his eyes. He knows what will calm him.

“How far does your oral fixation go?” Will offers a tentative teasing smile.

“You are clearly dying to find out.”

Will draws Daniel close, covering his mouth with kisses once again, more demanding this time, urgent. Daniel shudders against the scrape of teeth along his lower lip, gasps as Will bites down hard to pull at the tender pink flesh until Daniel can hardly stand it.

“Will…”

Daniel feels the blood rush to his brain and elsewhere as Will sucks on his lower lip. It feels incredible. Will…feels incredible. Daniel thinks he might faint if they keep this up.

Daniel is used to feeling the emotions of others in bed. It is always a challenging experience. Managing his own impulses and emotions while being bombarded with his partner’s is often tricky, but Daniel has learned to cope with the swell of emotion that accompanies sex, and certainly to use his empathy to his advantage.

Will poses an entirely different challenge. Daniel had known that first day in his office that Will was different, that he was receiving but a trickle of the flood Will kept safely inside his fortress. Will is such a powerful presence and Daniel is so attuned to him now that despite all the mental preparation Daniel thinks he might still be overwhelmed. He can only hope.

Will’s emotions roll and tumble, colliding with his own. Daniel pushes Will back so that their lips separate. Will raises his eyes to question Daniel, and immediately licks and bites at his lips.

Daniel wonders which of them is more fascinated with all things oral.

Time to find out.

Daniel tugs at the remaining blankets, yanks them clear off the bed. He turns back to Will slides in beside him and trails his fingers over the body he has been dying to touch. Will folds into his touch, yields his body up to Daniel and his own desires.

He wants Daniel to consume him so he can be swallowed up in bliss, mindless vacant bliss. He wants to consume Daniel, to sate the hunger for warm fragrant flesh that tantalizes his senses, to feel the luscious powerful rush that will come with the satisfaction of seeing and feeling Daniel come apart in his hands, in his mouth.

Daniel feels the press of Will’s hands along his sides to pause at his hips and squeeze. Daniel sucks in a breath and every muscle in his body tenses with the knowledge of what Will intends to do. He has surprised Daniel, again.

Will snaps the waistband of the checkered boxers that cling to Daniel’s hips. Takes his teeth to them, inhales the smell of soap and Daniel’s own particular maleness. Will nudges Daniel’s cock and balls through the flimsy fabric with his nose teasing Daniel and himself.

Daniel’s cheeks flush hot at the sight of Will on his knees face turned into his hips, hotter still as air, warm and moist sinks into the fabric. He closes his eyes as Will tugs the boxers off, groans with the touch of lips and tongue at the tip of his cock. Flinches in delight as Will nips at the length of him, and when Will smothers the thatch of black hair in kisses.

He caresses Will’s ears his fingers finding their way inevitably into his hair digging themselves into a mass of curls. The sensation of silk between his fingers and the velvety softness of Will’s mouth around his cock is almost too much.

He rocks in the bed legs splayed, belly up. Like prey.

He is not surprised when Will takes the length of him clear to the back of his throat.

Will adjusts his weight on his knees as he grips Daniel’s hips to steady himself. He knows Daniel likes it slow. Will takes his time, feeling the swell of his own cock pulsing between his legs.

There is a delicious throbbing that comes with the lack of tactile stimulation. As his cock hangs suspended with only the cool air to touch it, an almost painful ache keeps Will centered. He draws on Daniel harder, suck then thrust, suck then thrust…faster now.

Daniel gasps into Will’s hair, then arches backwards paralyzed with pleasure when he cums. He is vaguely aware that Will still grasps his hips, still holds his cock in his mouth as the spasms finally relent and his body begins to feel once again like itself.

Will rises from the mattress to kiss Daniel full on and deeply, hands clasping his neck from behind to press him closer still, to feel Daniel’s lips crush against his own, so swollen that they throb exquisitely with the contact.

The taste of himself on Will's lips brings Daniel back to the present fully aware Will is still waiting for his. Daniel feels his cock rigid against his leg. He nuzzles against the locks of hair that tickle his lips and nose. In a minute…

Will feels a prickle of goose bumps as the air conditioner hums and blasts beneath the window. Will sweeps a blanket from the floor and pulls it over them.

Will nestles against Daniel, allowing him the moment. He lets his fingers wander over Daniel's nearly hairless chest, so different from… He traces down to caress Daniel's smooth stomach, skin soft and damp with perspiration, the ripple of taut muscles that still quiver at his touch, not yet relaxed from the fatigue of climax.

Will can admire Daniel without feeling vain. Although their physical similarities had been disquieting at first, over time, Will does not see much of himself in Daniel at all. Daniel has his own expressions and mannerisms that define him in ways that are not anything like Will.

Better that he isn't. Will would have him no other way. How did Will ever manage to find him?

As though reading his thoughts, Daniel stirs beside him. He smooths his hands over Will's hips, pushes his thumbs into the bones so it hurts, just a little, just enough to cause Will to close his eyes and roll his tongue over his lips. Daniel takes the massage deeper into his flesh, his fingers drawing open mouthed sighs from Will.

Will rolls his head back, opens his mind to the tactile sensations that will overtake him. He awaits the sweet smelling ocean Daniel will bring so he can sink into the quiet he craves. He feels himself floating…

Until Will feels fingers at his navel and Will flinches. It's an involuntary reaction to the gentle pressing against his stomach muscles. Will grabs Daniel's hand before it can alight on the scar. He sits up.

Daniel eases Will back onto the mattress and with his free hand presses his knuckles along the line of Will's jaw to reassure, to soothe.

Will struggles against his own memory.

Blood. Betrayal. The cut…so deep…

A place was made…

Not Hannibal's hand there…Daniel's…Daniel's hand…

Will relents. This is therapy he reminds himself.

You want him to know you…see you.

Know me…see me…

Daniel feels Will's hand cover his. Will's muscles relax as Will spreads his fingers over Daniel's and squeezes. Permission. An invitation Daniel accepts.

Daniel bends to kiss Will's navel, then he nuzzles along his stomach, including the scar. He traces his lips over that, too. The scar is part of him and Daniel refuses treat it with any more reverence than the rest of Will's body. It has too much power over Will as it is.

Will relaxes with Daniel's kisses. Although no one has touched him since being released from the hospital, allowing Daniel to actually feels…good. It is because it is Daniel that is feels so…good.

He watches Daniel climb on top of him. Will sits up on his elbows shifts his weight on the mattress as Daniel shifts around on Will's thighs.

He slides backward along Will's legs, taking the remaining blankets with him. He grins at the slight shudder from Will at the exposure, to the cool air and Daniel's gaze. He pauses and raises a brow in surprise.

"Not circumcised, huh?" Daniel murmurs quietly as he stares up at Will.

"Louisiana…" Will mumbles.

Daniel crouches on his knees and runs his hands along the inside of Will's thigh. Feels Will's muscles tense in anticipation. He spreads Will's legs wider so he can sit comfortably between. Trim and well-muscled, Will paints a lovely picture on the bed.

Drowsy half-lidded eyes peer at him through that tousled mane of curls. He's simply maddening. Daniel's cock stiffens just looking at him. This is of course compounded by Will's emotional response.

Daniel moves his hands along Will's thighs - watches the ripple of pleasure it causes. With one hand he cups Will's balls, tumescent and warm - swollen silk at his fingertips. He slips his fingers lower to stroke the pucker of flesh beneath. A soft gasp as Will squirms but allows it. Daniel moves his hands down Will's thighs again, begins to kiss along the inside, to tease as his lips move slowly up, ever so slowly.

Will tilts his hips. The touch of Daniel's lips on the inside of his thighs, up one side and down the other sends tingles up his spine. His mind drifts until he feels fingers pressing at the base of his cock then the cool sweep of tongue and lips along its length. Daniel rests one hand on Will's pelvic bone to steady himself. He leans over and bites at Will's skin to make sure Will is still in this room, with him.

Will arches his back grips either side of the mattress. Daniel rewards that breathtaking sight with another scrape of his teeth along the tender flesh just below Will's navel, he bites, sucks feeling soft skin and hair fill his mouth.

Will clenches the sheets in his fists, twisting so tendons rise like cables up his arms.

With the other hand Daniel grasps Will's cock lifts it from the thatch of dark curly hair and rubs his thumb across the tip, enjoying the shudder it elicits from Will. He gently peels back the foreskin, Will trembles immediately, his breath catches and he holds it while Daniel's thumb circles the slit.

Daniel licks along the sensitive slit, his tongue perfectly rough and the charge is electric, it nearly sends Will off the bed.

The sensitivity is both exquisite and torturous. Will takes measured breaths as Daniel takes him in his mouth, slides his tongue on the underside allowing the tip to graze deliciously against the roof of his mouth. Will grabs at the sheet whining quietly it feels so good.

Daniel's hand cups his balls just the way he likes and he rolls his hips thrusting his length further nudging harder against the back of Daniel's throat. Will is so undone he can't think.

Slow gentle strokes alternate with frenzied thrusting. Will is almost there.

Daniel knows Will is about to burst at the seams. Will's breaths are ragged, tinged with soft cries as Daniel brings him ever closer. Will is panting now, his cock rigid. Daniel stops sucking, and much to Will's dismay, lets Will's cock slide out so that it lay slick and hard against his stomach. Daniel wipes the drool from his lips wets his fingers.

Will watches wide eyed as Daniel takes Will's cock back into his mouth, and the wet fingers disappear between his legs. Will feels Daniel slip one finger inside. That's all it takes really. Muscles clench in pleasure that spreads like heat. The pressure in his cock is unbearable.

Daniel curls his finger, a stretch, a press…

Will breaks.

Daniel feels Will's cock tremble then jerk in his mouth. He sucks and licks enjoying the sobs that rip from Will as his body succumbs.

It is only when the spasms have left him trembling and damp upon the twisted sheets that Daniel lets Will's spent cock slip from his mouth. He wipes his face with the sheet and stretches out beside Will on what is left of the bed.

"You uh, really tore this bed up." Daniel says, "I think there's a charge for that."

"They can bill me."

Will pulls Daniel down to him, kisses him deeply eyes cast down, seeming embarrassed suddenly by his display of affection.

Daniel strokes his fingers along the scruffy cheek, nuzzles Will's hair. He doesn't have to say anything. And neither does Will. He presses his lips to Will's head before gathering up the mess on the floor. He sorts the blankets, decides to leave the scratchy comforter on the floor, and makes up the bed quickly.

He throws the blankets over Will and climbs in. Will's eyes are closed, but he turns toward Daniel and nestles deep into the pillows. Daniel turns to lie on his side to face the window. After a moment he feels Will at his back, forehead pressed between his shoulder blades.

Will feels like he is floating. Floating on a sea. And there is nothing for miles, for as far as he can see.

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Du Maurier sets her plan in motion and Will and Daniel continue with therapy.

Slowly, he relaxes into the curve of Will's body. He breathes deeply into his pillow as Will breathes deeply into his neck.

As he hugs Will closer Daniel realizes there are no lines he would draw between them, no barriers he would not cross for Will. And this thought frightens him. As exhilarated as he feels right now, he knows Will's darker side remains and that Will has suppressed that part of himself for Daniel.

Chapter 29

Du Maurier sets her plan in motion and Will and Daniel continue with therapy.

Du Maurier is uncomfortable. She is uncomfortable because sweat trickles down the back of her snug black body suit to pool around the crack of her shapely derriere. Her hair is wound tightly around her head and stuffed into a *baseball cap*. She does not even know, remember, or care which team's logo is embroidered along its rim. She knows that it shields her face and keeps errant evidence from falling onto the floor of Graham's suite.

The uniform she wears stretches tightly along her back but she does not have to wear it much longer. She will discard the stained jumpsuit and utility belt as soon as she drives the cleaning service's vehicle back to the company garage where Signoria Talmo naps quietly in the trunk of Du Maurier's rental car wearing only bra and panties. She will awaken later, fully dressed and hunched over the steering wheel of her work van, drooling and wondering how she fell asleep in the middle of her shift.

Du Maurier must hurry if she is to download the contents from the hard drive of Graham's laptop. She has searched for a flash drive but found none. He either keeps it with him, or doesn't bother with one. He may upload files to some virtual storage, but his internet history will be written into the hard drive and therefore, accessible.

She waits as the laptop boots up. It is password protected of course. She slips a device into one of the USB ports and waits for the decryption program to upload.

Her jaw tightens and she gasps aloud as the screen erupts in a stream of white on black numeric code that flashes rapidly before her eyes. She has tripped something and the hard drive is wiping itself clean. She has now effectively rendered Graham's laptop useless.

She closes her eyes and shakes her head from side to side. This used to be easier, she tells herself. Perhaps she has become complacent. Whatever the reason, it does not matter. At least if she has no access to the information in this computer, neither does Graham. Until he secures another one.

Whether he has copies of his files or not she cannot know and whatever he has learned about Hannibal is lost to her. She cannot worry about it now. She is no worse off than she was before. She cannot feel loss over something she never actually had in the first place.

She leaves the laptop to its fate. At least Graham will never know it was tampered with. When she is finished, there will be no evidence of that, or much else in his suite.

She acknowledges there is not much else in the suite. Graham lives simply with few luxuries. His belongings are easily accounted for in drawers that slide open easily to reveal his clothes folded and arranged neatly. A nearly empty bottle of whiskey sits next to the equally empty refrigerator. Glasses, tumbler, and plates sit washed in the drain board. Utensils are clean and set upon a towel folded in half next to the sink.

The bed has been made in Graham's particular exacting way, blankets tucked just so into the mattress. Even the bathroom is spotless, accoutrements all arranged according to need. Form follows function. Tidy. Accessible.

Everything in its place. Just like Hannibal. Except for the ostentation. There is no room for pretension with Graham. His accommodations are as modest and unassuming as he is. Despite the prestige of living on Via dei Benci.

She opens the main door to his suite and checks the hallway. She slips the bag of tools over her shoulder. Ensuring that she has not been seen within the narrow confines of the palazzo's passages, she makes her way to the basement where the laundry room is. And the circuit breakers.

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Will opens his eyes to a wide strip of sunlight streaming through the curtains that is almost blinding in its brightness. It takes him a moment to recognize the hair sticking out from beneath the blankets is dark brunette like his own, not silken strands of dark ash blonde. The room is not bathed in the blue and cream he expects to see when he awakens to weight in the bed next to him. Hannibal's face is not gazing at him from the other side of the bed, dark eyes still hooded with sleep and mouth creased with the curious smile Will knows Hannibal reserves only for him.

Neither is the sunlight streaming through the window over the silhouette of Hannibal sitting in a chair with charcoal pencil and drawing pad, robe open to furry navel revealing his muscular chest, its satin edges trailing along the carpet.

Are you sketching me, Doctor Lecter?

Yes, I'm almost finished. Would you mind lying back as you were…please.

He groans and tries to put the images of his dream behind him. He presses his head into Daniel's back where he's lain the entire night. His body is dry and so is his hair. No damp curls pressed onto the pillows, no sweat soaked sheets to drag off the bed. Just as he had awakened in Hannibal's bed.

Daniel stirs and reaches a hand around to grab a handful of Will's hair and he tugs gently. He feels Will pressing against his back. He stretches out and turns over to find Will still coiled comfortably beside him. It is a sight Daniel would like to see every morning. His heart hitches in his chest and he smiles helplessly as the now familiar sweet ache spreads from his chest to his face.

It has been a long time since Daniel has felt this particular kind of ache. This aching that threatens to overwhelm him and short circuit every synapse in his brain that screams stop.

Will lifts his head to offer Daniel a smile. He immediately feels Daniel's mouth on his and all rational thought leaves his mind. He thinks of nothing else but the assault on his senses, the feel of soft wet lips against his own, the press of naked flesh against his own, of hair tangled around fingers.

Together, they roll and tumble on the bed, gently at first as senses and limbs acclimate and then more forcefully as their bodies entwine, movements synchronized each attuned to the other.

Will doesn't have to tell Daniel what he wants this morning. Daniel wants the same thing. Hard. Rough. Fast. He feels the slickness of Will's cock rub erect against his, and doubts Will would last long in his mouth. He knows he wouldn't. He's about to cum himself. He imagines if Will is feeling what he is, and Daniel is pretty certain he is; the barest of touches will set him off.

Will feels the glide of Daniel's tongue slide wet and warm over the tip and he groans as Daniel takes the length of him inside his mouth. He thrusts wildly, feels the delicious swell as his cock touches the back of Daniel's throat and his body shudders with tremors from the release.

Daniel groans beside him at about the same time. Will slips out of Daniel's mouth and curls up on the mattress, body still twitching. Daniel's hands are between his legs as he rocks into the disheveled mattress and twists of sheet and blankets.

Daniel can't get enough air. But the spasms of pleasure between his legs radiate throughout his body, the throbbing pulses are so intense he can't do anything but whine into the pillow. He feels Will pressing into his back again, arm over his shoulder pulling him close.

Slowly, he relaxes into the curve of Will's body. He breathes deeply into his pillow as Will breathes deeply into his neck.

As he hugs Will closer Daniel realizes there are no lines he would draw between them, no barriers he would not cross for Will. And this thought frightens him. As exhilarated as he feels right now, he knows Will's darker side remains and that Will has suppressed that part of himself for Daniel.

Daniel is frightened because he fears he will not be able to refuse Will anything when that dark side emerges from the shadows in Will's mind. Daniel has also done something he promised himself he would never do. He has fallen in love with his patient.

Will revels in the peace and contentment that seem to flow from Daniel, as though the mist has descended on him. His body is drenched in it as he clings to Daniel in the warmth of the sunlight. He knows this feeling will not last. It can't. But he can enjoy it while it does.

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Will sits across from Daniel at their table in the dining room of the hotel. They have already checked out and packed the car. They will finish breakfast, albeit more like brunch, and be on their way back to Florence and Fiesole.

That is, if Daniel ever finishes eating his breakfast. Will feels like they have been sitting here for hours. Will looks at his watch, sees Daniel is not wearing his.

“Where’s your watch? Don’t you usually wear one?”

“Yeah, I seem to have misplaced it. Probably lost it at the pool. Shit. I forgot to call about it.”

Daniel pushes his French toast around the syrup that covers his plate. He can feel Will staring at him as he pokes at the remaining piece of bacon. He saturates it with syrup and lifts it to his mouth, eyes still focused on his plate. He wishes Will would stop staring at him.

Will winces at the thick glaze of syrup on Daniel’s plate, just looking at it makes his teeth hurt. He had no idea a human being could consume so much sugar as Daniel had this morning. The pools of syrup he had poured over his French toast had drowned his eggs and bacon as well. Several packets of sugar had found their way into his coffee and he had quaffed down a large glass of orange juice. He had also smothered everything in butter.

Will had eaten a pretty hearty breakfast himself. He knows the reason for his appetite this morning. It sits right across from him.

Will is acutely aware Daniel has eaten his breakfast without looking up. He has talked between mouthfuls, but Will has been unable to catch his eyes since they sat down in the dining room. Will sets his coffee cup in the saucer and helps himself to another of the anisette muffins from the basket of pastries that sits between them. He is not used to avoidant behavior from Daniel. He had been fine in their suite.

“Daniel, you haven’t looked at me since we sat down. Come to think of it, you have hardly looked in my direction since we left the room.”

“And drawing attention to the fact is not going to change anything. I’ve noticed you aren’t looking around much either.”

Daniel waves at their server across the room. She nods and raises a finger to let them know she’ll be right over.

“You know why I don’t. What’s your excuse?” Will wipes his mouth with the napkin and tosses it aside.

Daniel sighs and shakes his head.

The sex had been incredible last night. They hadn’t been awake for five minutes when they went at it again this morning. Will has to know how he feels.

Daniel has been feeling quite contented all morning. In fact, he feels extremely contented at the moment since he senses Will’s emotions, too. Daniel cannot even think of a word that quite captures what it is he feels as he sits across from Will, but he does know he doesn’t want whatever it is to manifest all over his face in the dining room.

Daniel sets his fork down and lifts his head to finally look at Will. Will notices now that the faint blush of color along Daniel’s neck and across his cheek is not sunburn from yesterday. Of course. He should have realized Daniel was having a little trouble keeping a lid on his emotions.

“Daniel…” he begins.

“I haven’t stopped grinning since I got out of the shower. If I look at you, here, everyone in this room is going to know that…shit, Will. Just leave it alone.”

He grins at Will before ducking his head to look sideways at the server who is quickly approaching their table.

Daniel slips his credit card to the young server. With the other hand he retrieves his car keys from his pocket.

“Ready to hit the road?”

“I’ll just go wait in the car.” Will says as Daniel tosses him the keys.

As they speed along the interstate Will glances in the rear view mirror. The police car is following them again. Will had thought it had turned off a few miles back. He leans forward to check the speedometer.

“You want to drive?” Daniel asks him.

“No…just checking your speed. You, uh…like driving fast.”

“I do. Are you sure you don’t want to drive? You would love to drive this car, admit it.”

Will smiles. He would. But not with that cop behind them.

“You do know that cop has been following us for a while now.”

“Yeah…so?’

“So maybe you should slow down. I’m sure the speed limit isn’t eighty-five. Italy or not.”

“You didn’t complain on the way down. I drove just as fast yesterday.”

“I’m not complaining.” Will says, clearly irate that Daniel even suggests that he is, “There wasn’t a cop yesterday.”

Daniel likes how easy it is to piss Will off. He gets edgier every second. Daniel presses his foot on the gas pedal. The speedometer climbs up a few more miles per hour.

“He’s going to pull you over, Daniel.”

“What’s the worst that can happen? So I get pulled over. He gives me a ticket. I bribe him or I pay it. I drive off. It’s not like there’s a body in the trunk.”

He sees Will’s head snap to look over at him, eyes wide and lips parted.

“There’s not a body in the trunk, is there, Will?”

Will’s mouth falls open, but he manages a response.

"Not today." Will says mildly as he rubs his fingers along his nose, “You really are about as fucked up as I am, aren’t you?”

“Getting there.” Daniel says, grinning. Daniel thinks Will should laugh more often. His entire being lights up when he does. Will’s usual expression is so often as somber as his thoughts.

He eases off the gas and looks in the mirror. The flashing lights switch on and the siren blares from behind. Daniel hits the brake and begins to guide the Mercedes off road, but the police car swerves and passes them on the left. It speeds off down the highway, and disappears completely from view.

Daniel almost sighs in relief, but Will would enjoy that too much. He sneaks a look at Will anyway. Will gives him a sidelong glance, but says nothing. They are both startled by the ringing of a phone.

It is Will’s phone chime going off indicating a text message. He clicks on it to see it is from one of the twins. He pauses before reading it, preparing himself for the entirely different mindset he requires to deal with news of Hannibal.

Daniel watches Will read, observes the subtle changes in his features, the setting of lips and the tightening of his jaw suggest that the message must be about Lecter. He supposes he should be grateful Will hasn’t received any messages before now.

“Good news?” Daniel asks after Will has put the phone back in his pocket.

“I suppose good is a relative term. You sure you want to hear this? It’s about…Lecter.”

“If it affects you I should hear about it, don’t you think? I am in the loop now.”

“I suppose you are. I asked my source to investigate Lecter’s background. No one knows anything about him before he came to the U.S. Well, my source says to check my email for some files and that they are currently in France following up leads there.”

“France?”

“That’s what they said.”

“Who’s they?”

“A brother and sister who are employed by my benefactor, Mr. Verger.”

“Right. So, are you going to open up the email?”

“I can’t with this phone. I’ll have to wait until I get back and check from my laptop.”

“I’d like to know what they found out if that’s ok with you.”

“Daniel, I don’t want to pull you into this any further than you already are. Discussing the past with you in therapy is not the same thing as being actively involved in the present.”

“C’mon Will, anything you learn will change your perspective. You wanted someone to bounce ideas off of, an anchor. Well, here I am.”

Will knows Daniel is right. Whatever he learns about Hannibal will find its way into therapy somehow. Wills seems to tell him everything any way, eventually. He smiles to himself at this.

“I’ll send you what’s there when I open it. I have no idea what they found, so I’ll be as surprised as you.”

“Maybe I can offer something to actually warrant the outrageous fees I’ve been charging Mr. Verger.”

Will laughs and raises his brows at Daniel. “How expensive are you?”

“Is the therapy helping?”

“I think so, yes.” Will smiles again and wonders at how easily Daniel can tease smiles from him.

“Then don’t worry about it.” Daniel says, eyes on the road. “Since we can’t look at the emails until we get back, do you mind if we talk about some other issues with regard to your uh…therapy?’

“Let me guess…”

“At least I have a frame of reference now.”

Will thinks Daniel only thinks he has a frame of reference. He’s still on the appetizer.

Daniel continues to stare at the windshield. He knows it will be easier on Will if he doesn’t look at him. Will needs a buffer, he needs the illusion of privacy even if he is aware Daniel feels every emotion that flickers across his face or flashes beneath the surface.

Daniel takes out his cigarettes. He knows Will watches as he lights one, takes a long drag off it and sends a puff of smoke trailing up to the roof before the wind pulls it out the window. He waits.

Will thinks a cigarette looks pretty good right about now. Once he smells the smoke, he is certain he would like one. He breathes in deeply, and sighs knowing he shouldn’t indulge. He’s been doing so well. Daniel hands him the pack before he can even ask for it.

“What kind of doctor encourages smoking?” Will says he lights up.

“Smoking is maybe the least objectionable behavior I encourage with you. Professionally speaking I should just throw my license out the window right now.”

Will laughs at the remark but he knows a part of Daniel still wrestles with recent decisions…and impulses. *Welcome to the club…* He inhales and feels the rush of nicotine sink right into his brain, feels his body relax.

“I didn’t bring my notes so I’m kind of winging it here, but I have a pretty good idea of what I see as the primary issue that needs to be addressed.”

“You make it sound so clinical.”

“Sorry. Will, I know what twists you up the most. And everything else pretty much falls under that umbrella. That’s the anger I feel from you. Then there’s the regret and the guilt. We can’t even get into all that self-recrimination until we talk through the anger.”

“You think I shouldn’t blame myself for my own actions?”

Daniel feels the temper already bubbling inside. “Depends on what actions you are referring to. But…”Daniel pauses and looks at Will who is staring back intently, tempest rising in the sea of blue.

“But…we aren’t going to talk about that right now. We are going to discuss your feelings about Lecter. At least we’ll try.”

Will lets out a long suffering sigh. He leans back against the seat flopping against the headrest.

“Go ahead.” Will waves a finger through the air.

“Let’s clear the air. I want you to have no illusions about what I think is going on in your head.”

Will waits, not sure if he likes Daniel’s sudden change in tone.

“You hope that Lecter’s conditioning is responsible for your impulses, your urges in the bedroom. That becoming intimate with your instincts was all part of the lure.”

“What do you mean, I hope…?

“Let me finish. You hope because you want to believe your sexual responses were the result of manipulation while you were suffering from the encephalitis, that he took advantage of you…”

“He did. He abused my trust.” Will takes one more drag off the cigarette before flipping it out the window.

“You wonder how much of your performance with Lecter was you playing bait, and how much… wasn’t. And this is compounded by the knowledge that Lecter had the opportunity to manipulate your mind and your feelings.”

“Yes. But I don’t understand…”

“You want to believe all this because if you were conditioned for the sex, you were conditioned for the violence as well. That becoming intimate with your instincts was guided by Lecter at every turn.”

“You think I’m looking for a pass on this? Looking for a way to not feel responsible?”

“No, no. It’s way more complicated than that. If you believe that Lecter manipulated your feelings, your impulses, to such a degree that you were not acting of your own free will, then your hatred is valid and your vengeance is righteous. You want to believe that more than anything.”

Will is silent, jaw working a mile a minute. Daniel continues, knowing Will has to hear it.

“You could even live with that as the sacrifice you made to play the lure. No one made you seduce Lecter. You went into the game you played with your eyes open. Whether or not you blame Jack for pressuring you is another matter…”

“Jack had his own crosses to bear at the time. I am not without compassion for him.”

“How Jack dealt with the cards he got is on Jack. I’m talking about you.”

“Daniel, I am responsible. That I thought I could out think him, out maneuver him, cost everybody.”

“You think you deserve to pay more than you already have? Will, if you believe Lecter’s conditioning enhanced what was already there inside you; that means you are more like him than you want to admit. And this scares you.”

Will looks out the window. “I’m listening.”

“It also means that you can’t blame him for your impulses. It raises the possibility that you are a bad person. You have thought of this this already, and that’s why Lecter could gut you in his kitchen and why you never thought to raise your gun.

Will is staring at him, eyes wide and fists clenched at his sides. He sees Daniel looking at him. He glances down and slowly unclenches them. Daniel flicks his cigarette out the window.

“You have killed so you must be bad. Lecter kills so he must be bad. You won’t forgive yourself because that would mean you can be both good and bad at the same time, and if you allow that for yourself, you have to allow it for Lecter, too. And you don’t want to. Hating him is so much easier. Forgiving yourself might lead to forgiving him. And with forgiveness comes understanding. You aren’t ready or willing to go there yet.”

“You want me to see good, in Hannibal?”

“If it helps you see the good in yourself, then yes.” Daniel notes that this is the first time Will has slipped and called Lecter by his first name. He thinks this is significant. A turning point for Will… maybe.

Daniel can feel the anger and the confusion emanating off Will in waves. “No.” Will says, “I can’t accept that.”

“It’s like smoking.”

“What?”

“I smoke. That’s bad. I eat healthy. I go to the gym, but I still indulge in this habit that is really bad for me. It is going to kill me someday. But, I enjoy it. I am a contradiction.”

“Smoking is not killing people. Bad analogy.”

“Not really. Everything is relative. Good and evil are relative. Am I bad because I smoke? Am I good because I don’t kill people?”

“We were talking about conditioning. Conditioned responses. I wasn’t aware of the conditioning.”

“There are different kinds of conditioning. Some we can be aware of, some we don’t have to be aware of. You have been subjected to both. Awareness changes everything. Conditioning in itself is not a bad thing.”

“It’s in its application. I understand that.”

“Will, there is no reason to pick this apart technically. We both know how conditioning works. We all are products of conditioning in one way or another. Your responses to sex are partly a product of conditioning, as are mine. Of positive and negative reinforcement. The difference is your responses are specific to an individual, not learned over time from multiple partners."

Will shifts in his seat. He turns his head back toward the window, watches the fields roll past in a blur of green, yellow, and orange against blue sky. He could drift right now; let the sound of Daniel's voice roll past him like the fields of sunflowers…

He feels Daniel's hand on his thigh, feels the press of fingers willing him to stay in the present. He swallows and squeezes Daniel's hand, lets it rest there.

If Daniel has to keep his hand on Will's leg to keep him from drifting off the entire trip back home, he will.

"But Will," Daniel continues, "…your responses are also genuine. They are yours. What really concerns you are Lecter's intentions. You have to ask yourself what it is he wanted from you. The conditioning was a means to achieving that. Move past all the things he did to you, and the things he did to everybody else, and figure out what those things tell you about the man."

Of each particular thing, ask: What is it in itself? What is its nature?

"Think about what he does, beyond the obvious of killing people and eating them." Will says.

"Yeah…I'm sure you have puzzled over his pathology quite a lot. What did the Ripper do? And why did he do it?"

"We discussed this already. Lecter is not the Chesapeake Ripper anymore."

"No, he isn't. He evolved…didn't he?"

"Yes, yes he did. What are you getting at?" Will sits up in his seat. So many ideas and images churn and tumble through his mind he can't keep up.

"Think about it. Take your time." Daniel lifts his hand from Will's leg.

Daniel sees Will's eyes cloud up, sees the familiar tic along the lower lid as lashes flutter shut. He gives Will his space. He has no idea what Will is thinking about, but Will is engaged and interested and that, he believes, is a good thing.

Will can retreat and think for the rest of the ride back. They can revisit all this as much as they need. The important thing is that Will is thinking about it and in ways that haven't occurred to him. They should be arriving in Florence in less than half an hour. He'll let Will zone out and wake him when they get to his place off Via dei Benci. Will will likely appreciate being alone with his thoughts in the solitude of his own place.

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Hannibal retreats to his memory palace and he receives an interesting phone call.

The doorbell had chimed softly just as the kitchen clock clicked to seven. Hannibal’s hands had paused over the sink an involuntary response to the chime, but the flush of warmth beneath his sweater had been in response to his visitor.

“Hello, Will.”

“Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal had not been surprised Will had erected boundaries upon walking through his kitchen door. The illusion of formality would soothe muscles already alert and agitated, aware of the nervous energy vibrating in the air, every molecule charged with anticipation.

Chapter 30

Hannibal retreats to his memory palace and he receives an interesting phone call.

vetruvian man da vinci

Vitruvian Man, Leonardo da Vinci, 1487

And there was infused in that brain such grace from God, and a power of expression in such sublime accord with the intellect and memory that served it, and he knew so well how to express his conceptions by draughtmanship, that he vanquished with his discourse, and confuted with his reasoning, every valiant wit.

So Hannibal had quoted Giorgio Vasari on the genius of Leonardo da Vinci earlier today as he had taken his small group of professors through the wing of the gallery where Leonardo’s sketches were on display. The passage has run through Hannibal’s mind all afternoon as he has tended his garden that lies beyond the pool behind his grand villa. In complete solitude.

And there was infused in that brain such grace from god…

What he has is pure empathy…It’s an uncomfortable gift, Jack.

He bends the stem toward him gently so as not to break the tender green shoots or to cause the delicate yellow buds to come loose and fall thus depriving him of the lovely fruit. *Snip.* Another brown and withered leaf falls to the sun ripened earth. Hannibal gathers it up from the soft soil and slips it onto the page of newspaper he uses for his pruning.

He wipes a lock of hair out of his eyes, unused to the length still. Trickles of sweat run along his jaw, drip from his chin, indeed his entire head is moist on this excessively warm day in Impruneta. The day had not started out so warm, muggy certainly, but the cool dew of early morning had given way to blistering heat.

The blistering heat is the culprit wreaking havoc upon his garden daily, the reason Hannibal rests upon his knees plucking the dead from the living every afternoon. *Snip*. He watches the silent descent of the leaf as it settles to the earth.

Nature always wears the colors of the sprit Emerson had said. If that is so thinks Hannibal, the spirit is cloaked in contentment today. It is within the refuge of his garden that he finds some semblance of his former life. A garden invites wildness among the brick and stone and metal and glass of human existence. Here, Hannibal can truly enjoy his sanctuary.

His villa is not only a sanctuary from the agencies that would wrest him from this life, it is a sanctuary from the jungle of concrete and stucco beyond his walls. It is within Hannibal's walls the best of humanity dwells. And where the lesser of god's creations become sustenance for the worthy.

FaurePie Jesu plays softly; the plaintive tone of the requiem seems to rise from the ground to serenade nature herself. For Hannibal, gardening is an act of creation. He summons life with each caress of his fingertips upon the tender leaves and delicate blooms. *And god saw that is was good*, smiles Hannibal.

Hannibal loves the aroma of his tomato plants. He inhales deeply the distinct scent, fresh and clean through nostrils attuned to the most subtle notes of any fragrance. These are his plum tomatoes, his pride and joy. Meaty and firm they provide the perfect consistency for the myriad of Tuscan, Neapolitan, and Sicilian recipes he has prepared over the past year.

They are also quite perfect as they are, sliced on a bed of baby spinach and basil interspersed with thick creamy white slices of mozzarella cured in crushed pepper and olive oil. Seasoned with just a dash of sea salt, the taste of cool slippery meat and pearlescent pools of pulp melt on the tongue.

He clips a few more wilted leaves before moving on to the next plant. His fingers squeeze the plump red fruit and he selects the ones he wants. He thinks he may have to resort to canning a fair amount this season as he gazes at the basket at his feet. An exceptional harvest this year due in large part to the many hours he imparts caring for his crop.

Du Maurier is to join him for a late supper Monday evening. She has been in Fiesole with her patient, but needs to tend to a few other patients around Florence before driving back to Siena to recuperate. Her patient, the daughter of the winery owner, is apparently quite the handful. Hannibal wonders what particular insights this patient has the misfortune of providing Du Maurier.

As Hannibal understands it, this Lydia has been under Du Maurier's care for as long as they have been in Florence. And she has suffered two relapses, most recently a suicide attempt. Hannibal had been surprised Du Maurier had resumed practicing psychiatry here. She tended to avoid temptation.

Ah, but the mind must be stimulated. In Baltimore, she had limited her psychiatric experience to the academic, providing peer reviews for colleagues and stopping in as a guest speaker to the surrounding colleges on the east coast. She is afforded no such prestige here, and even if she wanted to indulge her more academic proclivities, their current situation precluded attention of that sort.

His position at the Uffizi is discreet. He is one of many professors and art historians intensely involved in their research and nearly disconnected to the modern world. For them, the past is the present. Because his tours and lectures are reserved to the few and the privileged and he has little to no contact with the public, Hannibal moves with anonymity through the galleries of the Corridor.

Hannibal moves with anonymity every day. Groceries are delivered. His few needs purchased on the internet are also delivered to his door. He feels invisible in his solitude. He paces through the finely furnished rooms of his spacious villa in solitude. He simply paces.

He thinks of da Vinci, who would most certainly have found worthy inspiration here in his garden. Leonardo's drawings of animals, both real and imagined had been the topic of his seminar today. As his guests had scrutinized the faded charcoals upon the aged and brittle parchment Hannibal had wondered how many dead creatures had found their way into Leonardo's workshop.

Leonardo's love of nature, especially animals extended even to rejecting meat. He was vegetarian by choice, an anomaly for his time. He bought birds, frequently sold as food not pets, to set them free. Hannibal had noted the volume of work that had survived the centuries. Leonardo's detailed drawings captured the living essence of birds, horses and…dogs.

Leonardo had maintained that no species of animal ate its own kind, except humans. His remarks had been prompted by Vespucci's recently published tales of cannibalism in the New World, but the comment was inclusive of all life. A true pacifist, Leonardo could not bring himself to partake of any living creature. Hannibal doubts the Italian master would have appreciated the irony in Hannibal being the garden's caretaker.

To hunt for the thrill of the hunt was a human trait. To rend is bestial; to enjoy it is human. Da Vinci's monsters were composite beasts. Always drawing from nature, the various body parts of his monsters had been created from living predators, not imagined. Leonardo's monsters were of the four legged variety, never two. Leonardo had not wished to acknowledge the beast in man.

Unlike Tier. Compelled to express his violent urges in the guise of predator and unable to see himself as such without his suit of teeth and bone.

A paradox. A true predator kills to survive. Tier had not eaten of his kill.

An irony. Tier had been unable to kill without his suit.

Tier had at least been comfortable with who he was, who he had become. Tier had embraced his nature. Had died embracing it, his life taken by the superior predator who, ironically, had fought against his nature, had feared it, had released it for the first time as Tier had gasped his last breath in his hands.

Hannibal has not been able to stop thinking about his lost weekend with Will. The first of many, and all that they shared is now secured within his memory palace. Tier had provided the awakening Will had needed. Will's entire being had been enflamed, his subconscious desires and impulses at long last recognized, kindled and set ablaze on his living room floor and later…in Hannibal's bed.

They both owed Randall Tier a debt.

Hannibal remembers well talking with Jack and Will once he and Will had finally arrived at the crime scene to stand in awe of the gruesome monument Will had made. Hannibal wonders still over the odd conversation they had shared around the surreal sight of the dismembered Tier mounted on saber toothed tiger bones.

Hindsight provides a painfully clear lens from which to view the past. Hannibal can see again the triumvirate, Hannibal, Will, and Uncle Jack circling around Tier and each other that cold, damp morning at the Natural History Museum.

After making it obvious he had not been pleased with their lack of punctuality Jack had prompted both Will and Hannibal for their thoughts as Tier's dead eyes had stared into the depths of the museum. Jack's eyes had flicked from Hannibal to Will relentlessly, puzzling over their comments and parsing their words for insight into their universe; a universe he could never be a part of.

Tier would have been caught eventually. And he would have led the FBI to Hannibal eventually. Tier's days had been numbered the moment Hannibal had dispensed with confidentiality and told Jack all about him. Hannibal could have killed him, but sending Tier to Will had served several purposes simultaneously.

Hannibal had known Jack suspected one, if not both of them by the time they had finished speaking under the cavernous vault of the museum. Motive escaped Jack and without it he was directionless in his investigation. Neither Will nor Hannibal should have been there, but Jack had never allowed FBI protocol to hinder his work.

Will was not FBI anymore; even his teaching position had been revoked. But, Jack still needed him.

Hannibal had been there because Tier had been his former patient. It had been Hannibal that pointed Jack in Tier's direction in the first place. Jack had no doubt done some serious head scratching while waiting for Hannibal and Will to arrive. His head had been ready to split in two by the time they had departed. Jack had likely hoped Will had nothing to do with Tier.

Will had quickly and effectively dashed that hope.

Different pathology, same instinct.

His killer empathized with him?

Don't mistake understanding for empathy, Jack. No, if there's anything…it's envy.

Envy?

Jack had raised his brows clear to the vaulted ceilings above them. Hannibal had just insisted the killer mounted Tier in order to inflict a final indignity upon him. This falsehood had been delivered to Jack in an attempt to misdirect, to point the finger elsewhere. To clear a path for Will that would lead Jack away from both of them.

But Will had practically admitted to it. Will had corrected Hannibal. He had offered his own interpretation, contradicted Hannibal right in front of Jack. Hannibal had then supported Will's interpretation, had allowed Will to run with it, curious to see what game Will was playing.

Randall Tier came into his own much easier than who killed him.

This is a fledgling killer.

Hannibal's remark had prompted Will's chin to lift just a fraction higher, his eyelids to tic ever so slightly. Hannibal had thought of the welts smarting along his collarbone, welts shared by Will who had stood with hands in pockets, evidence concealed beneath tweed and knitted wool.

He's never killed like this before, not like this…

Hannibal had spoken quietly at Will's back, watching Jack scrutinize Will with a discerning eye.

Not like this, no.

This is the nightmare that followed him out of his dreams.

Jack had stared at the both of them for several seconds; dark tired eyes had moved to one and then the other. Dark tired eyes that spoke of the precious time he had left with his wife, eyes that betrayed the anger as the minutes and hours ticked away, here far from his lovely dying Bella.

After a moment, Jack had cleared his throat. Will had continued to stare at Tier as though neither Jack nor Hannibal were even in the room. Will had retreated from the scene altogether, to that place in his mind no one could reach. Not even Hannibal.

Jack had walked over to Hannibal. He had thanked Hannibal for coming in on a Sunday morning. His thin smile had been edged with ice. Hannibal had nodded, had glanced at Will, who ignored him.

"Will…" Jack had touched the sleeve of Will's herringbone coat.

"Anything else, Jack?"

Will had blinked himself into the present, shaking off Jack's touch and the trance with a shrug. His left hand had disappeared into his coat to adjust his scarf. Hannibal imagined Will tracing his fingers along his skin and wondered what thoughts had passed through his mind as he had.

"Actually, yes. A word please, if you wouldn't mind staying a moment, Will." Jack's tone had left no room for minding.

To Hannibal he had said, "Doctor Lecter, thank you again. We'll take it from here."

Hannibal had then turned to leave glancing at Will who had caught his eye and had merely looked back at Tier or what remained of him. Jack had wanted to talk to Will alone and did not care if Hannibal knew it. Hannibal had left them there, but he had not left the museum. He had waited on the stairs, obstructed from Jack's view but not Will's should Will look in his direction.

It was clear they were having words. Jack had stood close to Will, imposing and authoritative in his brushed woolen coat and shiny badge. Will had faced him, a quiet reed before the oak, eyes blinking as his mind absorbed Jack's words.

Jack had moved to touch the collar of Will's coat, a clearly angry and invasive gesture. Will had deflected; a shoulder roll and a sideways glance had drawn Jack closer still. Jack had pushed his index finger against Will's chest. Will had recoiled from the touch and had inclined his head in response to Jack's tone finally turning his head away from his former boss. But he had not backed away.

While glancing at the stairs, Will had seen Hannibal poised and motionless in the shadows. Hannibal had seen the lift of his chin, the subtle shifting of lips, and then pale blue eyes had turned back to Jack. He had spoken quietly, head down hands still stuffed in his pockets.

Whatever Will had said made an impact. Jack had taken a step backward, then another allowing Will to move. He had turned away from Jack and moved toward the stairwell.

“You’re not hearing me, Will. You should follow me back to headquarters.” Jack had called after him.

Hannibal had descended the stairs then, had heard Will’s voice above him, from the top of the stairwell.

“No, I’ll be going home, Jack. Didn’t have time to feed the dogs this morning…”

Hannibal had stood next to his Bentley, parked alongside Will’s Volvo. Had watched Will approach, hands still in pockets, eyes distant.

“Dinner?”

A pause. “Eight?”

The hairs on Hannibal’s skin had bristled slightly against the fabric watching Will’s breath roll off his warm lips and hang in the chilly air. Eight o’clock was far too late to wait.

“Make it seven. For an appetizer.”

Hannibal had climbed into his car and driven from the parking lot watching Will in his rearview mirror. Will’s reflection had been watching him as well as he had climbed into his own car.

Hannibal had returned home, to begin preparations for dinner turning the conversation over in his mind. At the time, Will’s actions had seemed to Hannibal more of a taunt than anything else. A useless confession Jack could not use, but honest enough to please Hannibal and placate his own sense of guilt.

What Hannibal had witnessed had not been a performance, not entirely. Will had been dancing on the edge of a knife with Jack that day in the museum. He knows now the game Will had been playing; the only game Will could have played, and he had played well.

Will had presented coded messages to Hannibal and to Jack. He had been playing both of them, his actions still fresh in his mind as he had clung to his guilt. Aware of the trap he was setting for Hannibal but fully aware of his own urges.

He had said enough to let Jack know who the killer was, to let Jack know to leave him alone to do his job…on Hannibal. He had placed Jack in a delicate situation and he had taken the control of it away from Jack, at least tying his hands and getting them dirty. Jack had already admitted to pushing Will, under oath. He was doing it again. If Will went down, Jack would go with him.

Even without the trap, Jack could not act without evidence. There was no evidence at the crime scene to indicate where the murder had taken place.

To search for evidence at Will’s house would require a warrant. If Will were arrested, again, Jack would be called out on the FBI’s wide red carpet for involving him in a murder investigation, again.

Jack's professional credibility would crumble under the weight of unforgivable offenses. Without Will, his chances of capturing Hannibal evaporated. No motive and no evidence could be tied to Hannibal either.

Jack had not entirely swallowed Chilton's guilt despite Lass's damning performance, not that Hannibal had needed him to. The lines connecting the dots were merely the string to tie up a package the FBI had long since tired of waiting upon. Only Jack had not entirely trusted the evidence gift wrapped and thrust into his hands. He had placed his trust in Will to bring Hannibal in. But now, with Tier, he had two killers on the loose. And he could not do a thing about it.

Will had dangled means, motive, and opportunity in front of Jack like rotten fruit on a tree, but there were no gloves thick enough to insulate Jack's hands from the taint should he reach out to pluck them free.

So clever, his Will.

The doorbell had chimed softly just as the kitchen clock clicked to seven. Hannibal's hands had paused over the sink an involuntary response to the chime, but the flush of warmth beneath his sweater had been in response to his visitor.

"Hello, Will."

"Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal had not been surprised Will had erected boundaries upon walking through his kitchen door. The illusion of formality would soothe muscles already alert and agitated, aware of the nervous energy vibrating in the air, every molecule charged with anticipation.

Will had not used the front door since he had begun coming around for coffee; a habit Hannibal had missed when Will had been locked up. He had also taken to parking his Volvo far from street lamps.

Hannibal had taken his coat, slipped it off his shoulders for him, inhaling the familiar odor of dog mingled with the scent of heat and anxious perspiration. And Will had angled his head so Hannibal's nose could linger close to the hair that brushed against the collar of his shirt.

And then he had been gone, off to the other side of the kitchen, pacing before the print of Fragonard's *Bathers* hanging on the wall behind him.

Will's hair had been tousled as usual; Hannibal thinks he has yet to see a comb in Will's hands. But, he had showered again and had taken care to trim his beard.

He had dressed casually but with an eye to Hannibal's predilections; the corduroy trousers fitted snugly over slender hips, the seams tapered along the length of his legs. The simple cable knit sweater hugged at his shoulders displaying the contours of his body most sensuously. The cotton shirt beneath, had been left unbuttoned just enough to reveal pale skin streaked with pinkish marks from the night before.

The boots were all Will - barely tied with tongues catching the fabric of his trousers as he walked around Hannibal's kitchen trying to look at ease, but not quite pulling it off. Hannibal had given him his space. Allowed Will time to transition from the solitude of his car to the stimulation of Hannibal's kitchen.

To adjust to the sight of Hannibal in a cashmere sweater and brushed cotton drawstring pants that hung loosely almost touching the floor as Hannibal had moved about his kitchen barefoot. To accept the unspoken invitation to make himself at home as Hannibal scrubbed vegetables over the sink.

Hannibal had already made modifications for Will. It was a simple thing, to put him at ease.

Music played low throughout the house, Beethoven's *Piano Trio in B Flat*, the track lighting overhead had been adjusted to shine a little less brightly, and a bottle of wine had been set ready on the counter. Hannibal had poured two glasses, had offered one to Will, and had raised his glass.

Will had answered with a tilt of his own glass before taking a tentative sip and then swallowing down a healthy gulp eyes on Hannibal, knowing Hannibal would take pleasure in watching the subtle movements of his throat.

Hannibal had drunk from his own glass as Will had watched him with a similar satisfaction. Each of them fascinated, each wary of the other, and both knowing where they would end up. It had been the getting there that Hannibal had enjoyed so much.

They had taken up their usual positions, Hannibal at the center-island, and Will opposite, arm resting on the counter, fingers curled around his glass of wine, a tether to reality. He had swirled the ruby colored Bordeaux around the glass adjusting to the space, adjusting his body so that its affect aligned with his attitude, his mindset.

He had gazed around the kitchen and circled back again, his eyes finally alighting on Hannibal, centered – placid and blue.

"The dogs were happy to see you, no doubt. All is well in your little boat upon the sea?" Hannibal had looked up from the cutting board, Will's image reflected in the blade of the chef's knife he held in his hand.

"Despite the storm that rocked it the other night, yes." Will's eyes had narrowed as he had held Hannibal in his gaze. "The injuries to Buster were superficial…if that matters to you."

"If it matters to you; it matters to me." Hannibal had said in all sincerity.

Will had swirled his wine, set the glass upon the counter and placed both hands flat, his bandage frayed and tinged with dried blood. He had flexed his knuckles watching the bandage constrict more tightly around his hand.

"You sent him there to invade, to pollute my space, and…to kill me."

Spoken like the predator he was, radiant with his newfound flush of power.

"I sent Randall there to die…at your hands. You are quite aware that was the expectation."

"My home is tainted with his blood."

Powerful and petulant. So infuriating, his Will.

"As are your hands. You feel as though you have desecrated your home?"

"I feel like you have desecrated my home."

“Desecrated or sanctified? It is really a matter of perspective. He would have taken your life had you not been the stronger. You reclaimed what was yours. In blood.”

Will had been quiet, contemplative as he stared into his wine. Hannibal had continued to rinse the greens for their salad.

“What is Jack thinking about Tier?” Hannibal had asked after a moment.

“He is thinking about questions he doesn’t want answers to.” Had come the reply, softly spoken and without hesitation.

“For now. Jack will press you. It is his nature.”

“He will press you, too.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“How do you feel?”

Will had swallowed down the rest of his wine; then had reached for the bottle. He had poured himself another glass. And, without asking, he had leaned over the counter and topped off Hannibal’s glass, eyes trailing the flow of ruby colored wine until, having filled Hannibal’s glass once again, had lifted those pale blue eyes to Hannibal’s and had leaned further across the counter so that his lips almost grazed Hannibal’s chin.

All the musky sweetness that was Will had filled his nose, igniting all of his senses. The taste of the wine on his lips and the scent of Will in every breath had been intoxicating. As Will had known it would be.

Hannibal had wanted to rip his clothes from him right then and there. And Will had known that too.

“Didn’t you say something about an appetizer?” Will had asked, rolling his tongue over wine stained lips.

Hannibal had reached for him then.

Hannibal had not even cared about the wine all over the counter, or the broken glass on the hardwood floor.

The cell phone chirps from where it lay on the wrought iron table. Hannibal almost ignores it, but he so rarely receives phone calls he picks it up to see who calls him at this number. There are only a few possibilities.

Seconds tick by as Hannibal stares at the number on the tiny screen. It has been many years since he last accepted a call from his cousin.

“Hello, Roberta…”

Long after the phone call has ended and twilight beckons along the horizon, Hannibal still sits quietly on the stone bench in his garden, basket of tomatoes and peppers at his feet. He must think through the information he has just received from his Uncle Roberto’s daughter. Apparently, a couple has been asking questions about the Lecter family. This couple had been asking questions in Lithuania, then Prague, and now France.

He has heard the name Paolini before. It seems to Hannibal that was the surname of one of the employees at the Verger estate. Carlo was his name, wasn't it? Or had it been the other one…the one who had bled out after removing Hannibal's scalpel from his thigh? Ah, yes, Matteo.

Sardinians are a most vengeful bunch. Now, what is to be done about that?

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

> Will has some strange dreams on the way back to Florence.
>
> Will almost trips over the sand, NO…no…not again…
>
> He recognizes the lone warrior as he staggers closer, breathless, the sand stinging his bare arms and legs, straps of leather cutting into his feet.
>
> Hannibal? He gasps the name into the wind. He looks upon the maiden Hannibal holds in his arms, dressed in a white chiton, the thin linen falls from her narrow shoulders exposing one fair breast. Her entire body quakes with every breath she draws between her trembling lips. Will cannot even say her name aloud… Abigail he mouths soundlessly as he falls to his knees in front of her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 31

Will has some strange dreams on the way back to Florence.

The figures seem to dance across time; faded red bodies vibrate on black ink as the plates melt and drip from the bookshelves in Daniel's office. Will sits in his usual couch, watching the red and black droplets stain the carpet in Daniel's office. He thinks of his therapy with Daniel here and of his therapy with his former psychiatrist. He leans over and peers between his knees to look at Hannibal's office below as the drops of red and black splatter onto the ladder at his feet, the hardwood floor, and finally the large antique desk he knows so intimately.

Beads the color of blood rain down upon Hannibal's drawing of Achilles mourning the death Patroclus until the charcoal figures and the thick paper that contained them are drowned in a sea of red much like the words exchanged between doctor and patient in this very room, echoes of regret amidst truths embedded somewhere within the deceit.

Therapy is such a loaded word. Does he have psychiatrists or conversations?

Am I your psychiatrist, or are we simply having conversations?

"Yes" I think is the answer to that.

The ocean roars through Will's head, his thoughts tossed like pebbles along the shore. Will gathers them up in his mind, and they sift, coalesce, and connect though cohesion is as distant from Will as the wave that crests suspended, ever reaching toward the shore but never quite breaking upon it.

You have to ask yourself what it is he wanted from you…

Will stares out the window of the Mercedes but Daniel knows he does not see the vineyards and fields of Tuscany. He does not seem to feel the wisps of hair that lace his cheeks or his lashes from the constant wind that blows through the open window, nor does he seem to notice the city limits of Florence rapidly approaching as signs for the Boboli Gardens and other tourist sights begin to appear along the highway.

Daniel can only wonder where Will is right now.

Will has allowed his mind to free associate in response to his conversation with Daniel, inviting thoughts and images he culls from his memories. His subconscious paints the images that populate the incredible landscapes he inhabits, visions very different from the images he summons at crime scenes. He knows his mind holds far more than he is aware of at any given moment of cogent thought and he trusts his mind to do what it does, has done, all his life.

His thoughts frighten him still. He cannot force a pattern upon them, they grow wild in the field of his mind untended and shunned like forbidden fruit. These are the nightmares that continue to follow him out of his dreams.

He knows where he will invariably end up. He always finds his way there, one way or another, because he exists there. Because nothing in his life has robbed him of his senses, his body, or his mind, like Hannibal has.

No, no…don't. Don't…please…

He spits the blood out of his mouth, again.

He sees Abigail slip to the floor, the sacrificial doe on Hannibal's altar. Hannibal had saved her life; his right to take it. It seemed Abigail's fate to die at a father's hand.

The shadow of Hannibal falls over him as he tries to staunch the flow of blood…

I've only ever wanted what is best for you.

No, you w…wanted what was best for you…

Will…

Hannibal extends his left hand to touch Will's shoulder, but Will flinches away, recoiling at the sight of the stained fingers. Hannibal withdraws, lets Will speak.

You…you wanted something m…more.

And you did not?

You s…saw more, w…wanted more…than I was p…pre…pre…pared to give…

It hurts to concentrate. His mouth struggles to form the words he presses through his colorless lips. Will knows he won't be conscious much longer...

What did you show me Will? Did I ever really see you? I was honest with you Will.

Will clutches at his tattered shirt, soaked and black with blood as he leans against the cabinet on Hannibal's kitchen floor…again. He keeps returning here…why can't he stop, stop…

I let you know me, see me. I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it.

Didn't I?

No…you did not allow yourself to see. The scales fell from your eyes but not from your mind.

I s…see y…you well enough.

The floor feels like ice as his damp clothes stick to his skin. Will could sink into the floor, his limbs feel so heavy.

You still see with your eyes, through the lens of Jack, the lens of the FBI…not mine. You have the ability to see me Will. And you did glimpse and you became afraid…

Hannibal leans down closer, sinks to his knees, his surgeon's hand slips between Will's bloodied hands to touch the torn flesh Will is holding together with slippery soiled fingers. Will's hand trembles as Hannibal gently moves Will's fingers apart so he can open the flesh wider to peek inside.

You want to believe I am the serpent in the garden. And you fear the same serpent lies coiled inside. You don't have to fear it, Will.

Hannibal's eyes are touched with sadness, dark and glistening as he gazes at Will.

I let you release it…from me. T—To cut it, cut it out…

Not possible. Ah, my dearest Will.

Hannibal's hand falls away from his wound, his mouth twisted in anguish.

Will's eyes trail down Hannibal's right shoulder along his rolled up sleeves to the blood stained knife Hannibal still holds tightly in his fist. Will slides his feet helplessly against the wet floor. He doesn't know why he tries to stand up. He knows he can't. He slams his head against the cabinet to distract him from the pain.

That's not why you lay here Will.

You are the s…snake whispering l…lies from the sh…shadows.

Will hisses between clenched teeth his eyes shut. He can taste his salty tears mingled in the iron rust that trickles from his mouth.

Who lied? The serpent or god? When their eyes were opened…did they die? Did they die, Will?

They…they were c…cast out.

Will is cold, so very cold…

Cast out because they disobeyed? Or because they tempted God's anger daring to be more…like him?

Will looks at Hannibal kneeling on the floor next to him. Thinks he was supposed to leave…why is he still here…?

Will…If we learn our limitations… Hannibal prompts as he wipes the blood from Will's stained lips with his own fingers.

If we learn our limitations too soon…, Will's lips move, his eyes look up at Hannibal through slits, he hears the ocean.

…we never learn our power. Hannibal's fingers fall from his lips.

Will retreats into the sound of waves washing over him. When he opens his eyes again he is lying face down on the shore, the sea at his feet. He pushes himself off the sand and begins to walk along the shore toward the people he sees in the distance. His body feels different, heavier, he knows he no longer wears trousers or shirt as he walks along the beach, but he doesn't take the time to look. The need to hurry is foremost on his mind.

He feels no pain in his side as he begins to run across the wet sand. The wind begins to swell and he feels the spray of ocean on his face, in his hair.

He sees boats further out. Like the curtains that once enclosed Hannibal's office, red and white striped square sails hang limp from tall masts, and… oars extend uselessly along the wooden decks. Will begins to run more quickly along the beach, to see what kind of ships are these…

As his feet sink into the sand, he thinks of the plates on Daniel's bookshelf in his office, scenes of the Trojan War reduced to red figures etched on black, tragic heroes from the past… Of battle tested friendships etched in charcoal.

These are ancient Greek ships, Triremes, out at sea, filled with ancient warriors and there are more warriors, stretching beyond the dunes wearing plumed Greek helmets, bronze cuirasses and carrying freshly forged swords and spears, some watching from the dunes…

He is on the shores of Aulis and he holds a spear in his hand. He wears a gleaming cuirass, too.

A lone warrior, dressed in sandals, leather skirt and cuirass polished so fine the reflection off the sun is blinding, stands on the beach holding up a young girl, long braid down her back, legs splayed coltishly in the sand. He holds in his hand a short sword angled at her throat. His thumb caresses the ball of the gem studded hilt, eyes fixed on Will.

Will almost trips over the sand, *NO…no…not again…*

He recognizes the lone warrior as he staggers closer, breathless, the sand stinging his bare arms and legs, straps of leather cutting into his feet.

Hannibal? He gasps the name into the wind. He looks upon the maiden Hannibal holds in his arms, dressed in a white chiton, the thin linen falls from her narrow shoulders exposing one fair breast. Her entire body quakes with every breath she draws between her trembling lips. Will cannot even say her name aloud… *Abigail* he mouths soundlessly as he falls to his knees in front of her.

He knows who Hannibal is in this twisted reenactment in his mind. The Greek fleet floats upon a still sea at the mercy of Artemis, fickle goddess of the hunt. Hannibal raises his right hand over

Abigail's head, dagger poised. He lifts his head to the sky. The wind whips at his face and the braided locks of hair that hang down his back.

He lowers his gaze to stare at Will with eyes the color of burnt blood, cold beads that bear down on Will still crouched at Abigail's feet. When he speaks his voice is terrible and low and Will sees Abigail shudder against the arms that hold her.

Agamemnon sacrificed his own beloved daughter, Iphigenia to Artemis so the goddess would release the Achaeans' ships and send a strong wind to carry them to Troy.

No! Wait…

Agamemnon with his ash blond hair and chiseled cheek bones stays the knife at Iphigenia's scarred throat.

Wait…Artemis sends a deer to die in her place…

Ah, not this time. Did Achilles send you, poor Patroclus? Does he still desire the gods to hurl my fleet to Poseidon, dashing timber and bone upon the rocks so you two might storm the walls of Troy together? Unless you have wings, you will need my fleet to deliver you. The fleet cannot sail without her sacrifice. If you would have the crown that the Fates hold fast; she must die.

Here…take this…

He holds out a long strip of fabric that flutters in the wind. Will takes the dark veil spun of the finest rubicund silk to hold tight between his fingers lest the tempestuous breath of Artemis snatch it away.

What would you have me do with this?

Bind her mouth so she cannot curse us with her dying breath…

Will blinks the stinging sand from his eyes…

He is suddenly seated at Hannibal's dining room table, back in Baltimore. The table is set, complete with huge goblets of ruddy red wine, as crimson as the silk that slipped through his fingers not a moment ago. To his right, at the head of the table sits Hannibal in pale plaid suit of muted blue and across from him sits Daniel, looking wan and a little tipsy wearing a beige cable knit sweater. Will shifts uncomfortably in his seat too warm in his flannel shirt and wool blazer.

They are eating trout.

Beautiful fish, Will. Hannibal says, dishing up a plate for Daniel.

Daniel accepts the plate, his fingers pale, flakes the color of brick beneath his nails too dark to be wine.

You're welcome. Will answers his lips numb, hands in his lap unable to take up his knife and fork.

We're all Nietzschean fish… Hannibal says turning to Daniel.

Makes us more tasty. Daniel says from the other side of the table, placing a forkful in his mouth. He smiles at Hannibal who turns to Will with spatula in hand.

Your plate, Will?

"Will…Will!" Daniel says, tapping him on the shoulder. "We're here, but you'd better brace yourself. We're going to have to walk the rest of the way…" Daniel's eyes are wide and gentle as he stares into Will's blinking blue ones. "It looks like there was a fire at your place."

Chapter End Notes

Sacrifice of Iphigenia
The 5th century BC krater depicts the dual images of Iphigenia and deer alluding to Euripides' version where Artemis substitutes a deer and Iphigenia is not killed, but sentenced to serve as a priestess in the Temple of Artemis in Tauris, where it is the custom is to brutally sacrifice all foreigners. Iphigenia shares in the curse of House Atreus. She is doomed to be killed or become a killer.

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Will and Daniel get some answers about the fire from an unlikely source.

As they approach, several police officers bar them from advancing further. They have managed to reach the back entrance, almost. Will wants his access to the scene and Daniel knows he wants to see if there is anything left to collect just as badly as he wants to determine what happened with his own peculiar gift. They argue with the officers and just as tempers are about to flare, Will and Daniel hear a familiar deeply accented voice from behind them.

"I'll take it from here. I know these two."

Chapter 32

Will and Daniel get some answers about the fire from an unlikely source.

Will stares into Daniel's face uncomprehending.

"Will…the palazzo is ruined. We need to find out what happened."

"No…" The familiar fatigue threatens to pull him back into his retreat, but he finds the strength to pull himself up and out of his seat.

Via dei Benci is lined with fire trucks and cars as people swarm around the vehicles like flood waters. Will climbs out of the Mercedes to stand beside Daniel in the midst of the chaos. The smoke is ominous and heavy in the humid summer air. Ash and particles of what was float and then settle covering everything on the street in sooty gray residue.

"Are you…here, now?" Daniel says, not sure if he should grab Will's arm to steady him, or let him be. Will looks dazed as he stands next to the car trying to blink himself into the now.

Daniel knows Will is resilient, but he just can't seem to get a break. This kind of loss would be upsetting to anyone, Daniel can feel plenty of anguish all around, but he feels the distress in Will acutely. He looks calm on the outside, and yet Daniel can feel him struggling against the understandable urge to rage over the insanity of it. He's ready to lose it himself. How much can a person take?

"I…feel like I've been thrust from one nightmare into another." Will says, he closes his eyes a moment and the painful grimace causes Daniel to wince.

It seems to Daniel this connection between them is becoming stronger. He's not sure that is a good thing. His empathy has its benefits, but retaining his sense of self, of separateness from Will would be…prudent. He doesn't have time to think about it at the moment.

"I had to park here, but I see law enforcement up ahead. We need to talk to them."

"I can do that." Will forces himself to look around, detach himself from it. Treat it like a crime scene. He can see his former residence at the end of the block. The ruins of the building smolder as ash smoke, and steam rise against the blackened sky.

When Will finally starts to walk, Daniel locks his car and moves to walk beside him as they wind their way through the people milling about. The area is securely cordoned off and the police presence is evident everywhere they look. The palazzo is utterly ruined, an empty shell in shambles.

"It doesn't look like there is much left." Will says as he scans the immediate area. He feels numb, like this is another dream he is walking through.

"How are we supposed to get through? There has to be a command center of some kind where we can get information." Daniel cranes his head trying to see above the crowd.

"It would be where the trucks are. We're almost a block away as it is." Will says remembering there is a back alley that joins his palazzo with the adjacent one. "There may be less of a crowd on the side way from the street. Let's try the next street over, go around back."

It takes a little while, but soon they have advanced around the corner and are headed toward the next corner that will take them where Will leads.

Daniel knows it is going to be bad. He can feel both excitement of those drawn to the macabre and sympathy from others among the onlookers as they walk past on their way around the next corner.

As they approach, several police officers bar them from advancing further. They have managed to reach the back entrance, almost. Will wants his access to the scene and Daniel knows he wants to see if there is anything left to collect just as badly as he wants to determine what happened with his own peculiar gift. They argue with the officers and just as tempers are about to flare, Will and Daniel hear a familiar deeply accented voice from behind them.

"I'll take it from here. I know these two."

Detective D'Angelo wipes at the grime on her face. Her damp shirt is smudged with soot and is tucked into low cut pants that cling to her like a second skin. Her hair is clipped in a tight pony tail that brushes her collar. It looks like she lopped off at least six inches of dark brown hair since the last time Will and Daniel saw her.

She still wears no makeup and Will decides she does not need it. He focuses on her canvas shoes that are quite ruined now. He finds himself wondering why she did not wear more practical shoes…

"Been out of town I see. Perfect alibi." She smiles as she says this and both Will and Daniel breathe a sigh of relief at seeing someone they know. Someone who might help.

"Dr. Clayton." She nods at Daniel and adds, "Detective Ruggerio isn't here this time." She peers into his face, challenge given.

Clayton bites at his tongue and quietly swallows the tart remark that was poised on its tip. She shut him down pretty quickly because her focus is undeniably on Will. He can feel her compassion for him - can feel her desire to *be* closer to Will. Daniel rejects the challenge. Maybe Will can persuade her to help. He looks over at Will who stands facing the ruined palazzo, gazing at D'Angelo from the side, seeming to contemplate both at the same time.

She dismisses Daniel from her thoughts and turns to Will. She wants to talk to Will without the interference of Clayton's protective bubble hovering over him. She wonders if Clayton is really his shrink.

"Mr. Graham, I am so sorry. Your residence is pretty much a total loss. What the fire didn't destroy, the smoke, heat, and water damage did. I can't let you go in there.

"Well, give us the good news first." Will says, flicking ash out of his eyes.

D'Angelo takes a breath. Her smile is kind, ever compassionate. "Electrical fire it looks like. Preliminary assessment is that it was accidental. Did you know your neighbors, Mr. Graham?"

"Not really. Just greetings at the mailbox. Why?"

"The tenant the floor below you, retired, senior citizen, lived alone with her cat?"

"Signora Rossi? The fire started in her suite?"

"Looks that way. The fire traveled right up the wires to your suite."

"Did she…make it?"

"Afraid not."

"Any other…loss of life?"

"Miraculously, no. Everyone got out who was home. The fire started before dawn. Not much warning though, no time to take anything with them. I hope you had insurance…" D'Angelo lets the matter drop.

"I did…do. Look, can I talk to the…fire marshal or one of the investigators?" Will says.

"I know you have lots of questions, but you aren't law enforcement here. You are civilian."

Will paces in front of her. He knows she is doing her job, but she owes him. He thinks he should call in his favor. Actually, he shouldn't have to. He bites at his lip thinking how to phrase his request.

Before he can open his mouth Daniel speaks up, "Detective…you do know what Will did for the FBI, right?"

D'Angelo looks from one to the other. "Alright, so I do. Did he tell you I called him about crime scenes?"

Daniel looks at Will who gives him a sidelong glance and a weak smile. D'Angelo rolls her eyes. "I'll take that as a negative. Is he still your patient, Dr. Clayton?"

“Yes. Why?”

“Because I am trying to figure you two out.”

“What is there to figure out?” Daniel says, “Look, let’s start over. This is Will. I’m Daniel. And you are…”

“Detective.” D’Angelo crosses her arms over her chest and angles her head to one side. “I’d really like to help, but my hands are tied. This is not a police investigation.”

“Then, why is a detective here?” Will says, looking into her face, something he has not done since she walked up to them. Her soft brown eyes catch his. Will’s hands find his pockets. “You’re not here for crowd control.”

D’Angelo looks aside, and shakes her head. “I was the one on call, so I came out to the scene, but once they called it accidental and removed the body…I could have gone.”

“You knew I lived here…” Will searches her face, “Were you concerned for me, Detective?”

D’Angelo purses her lips trying not to smile. “Yes, given your proclivities and habits, yes I was.”

“Careful Detective, we might become friendly.” Will says quite seriously.

D’Angelo gives him the eye for a long moment and then hold holds out her right hand to Will “I’m Alia. Alia D’Angelo. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Graham.”

“Will.”

He takes her warm hand in his, grasps it for a long second and finds her brown eyes a little too intense. D’Angelo pulls her hand back and brushes at the soot on her shirt.

“I suppose it’s even futile to try,” she says, “if I start, I won’t stop.”

Daniel notes the quiet exchange of electricity between them as their hands touch briefly, empathy not required. D’Angelo has done a one eighty on Will since the first time they met. Will is retreating as they speak; the touch of her hand enough to summon his wall. Daniel wonders how many conversations they have had. About crime scenes. It would seem Will does not tell him everything about everyone. Daniel waits to see how long it takes for D’Angelo to fold and lead them to the fire marshal.

Will turns toward what is left of the palazzo and considers that nothing remains of his belongings. There wasn’t that much, he can replace the clothes, but the laptop was secured. He can get another laptop, but not like the one in his suite which is likely unrecognizable at this point. He kept some files on the flash drive in his duffle bag, but access to most was through a secured storage site that recognized the melted laptop. He groans inwardly. This will require a call to Jack.

D’Angelo interrupts his thoughts. “You would really like to have a look around wouldn’t you?”

“Just to see if what I see concurs with what the official report says, yeah – I would.” Will looks toward an ambulance. “They already took the body away?”

“Yes, a least an hour ago. Uh, not much left to see really. She will still have to be identified. Her place was pretty much consumed. It burned hot once it got going. She had a lot of flammable items, like curtains, old upholstery and antique furniture that went up like kindling."

"I'd still like to have a look around if you can arrange it. I wouldn't need a lot of time."

"Ok. I'll introduce you to one of the guys I know. He's a pretty good investigator himself. His English is not so good, so maybe I should stay close?"

Will nods and looks to Daniel, who has been standing behind him. Daniel catches D'Angelo's eyes and knows instantly he will not be joining them. She can have her moment with Will. Might even be good for him.

"He stays here." D'Angelo says and manages not to smile…too much.

Daniel sighs and takes a step back. He hates it when he's right. D'Angelo looks back to Will who stands with hands back in pockets, brows up awaiting an explanation.

"I can get you inside, but not both of you." She shrugs it off with a frown and a toss of her head. Her expression is so typically Italian.

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere." Daniel grins at D'Angelo and waves Will off.

"Thanks." Will says as he turns to follow D'Angelo through the yard full of mud and debris.

Daniel watches them pick their way across the yard trying to keep their footing as they sidestep the debris and mud. It occurs to him that Will is going to need a place to stay. At least until he can make other arrangements. Daniel rubs at his eyes and feels the residue cling to his fingers as he does. He thinks the soot clings to his skin the way bad luck seems to cling to Will. He hopes Will finds nothing suspicious. His mind is already occupied enough.

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Hannibal retreats to his memory palace, prompted by the call from his cousin.

Uncle Roberto presses a thick manila envelope into Hannibal's hands; an envelope Hannibal knows is filled with francs of sizeable denomination. He is to exchange them for U.S. dollars in anticipation of his new life in Baltimore, in the state of Maryland, a place he has never even thought about until his acceptance letter from Johns Hopkins University.

Hannibal brushes the hair from his face and lifts his eyes to his uncle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 33

Hannibal retreats to his memory palace, prompted by the call from his cousin.

Hannibal sets his cell phone on the blue veined marble counter in his kitchen. He has just finished speaking with Tatiana and is satisfied with her handling of his affairs. Apparently, Du Maurier believes she calls Banque Suisse every other day to inquire about the balance and the transfer she expects is imminent. His lawyers have likewise been contacted by Du Maurier's lawyers requesting an update on the paperwork for the transfer of deeds.

Hannibal presses a finger to his temples, feels the throb of blood pulse uncharacteristically warm against his bronzed skin. He will have to address this impatience tomorrow evening at dinner. Du Maurier knows her calls will be reported to him. She is deliberately making a nuisance of herself.

She does not expect Hannibal to act any more quickly in response; she wants his attention. Well, he smiles; she shall have that and then some. She should be careful what she wishes for.

Du Maurier believes she calls Banque Suisse every day because Tatiana has intercepted every one of her calls to Banque Suisse since Du Maurier never fails to use her cell phone. Tatiana has cleverly alternated taking Du Maurier's calls with an associate so that Du Maurier does not receive the impression that Tatiana is the only person employed there. There is the possibility that Du Maurier might lose her phone somehow, but she would likely retain the same number and Tatiana has assured Hannibal that unless Du Maurier deviates from routine and calls from someone else's phone, any other contingency is covered. Tatiana's expertise is not cheap but Hannibal believes she is worth every Euro, and there have been many, many Euros. It is only money after all.

He sighs and turns his attention to his recipe box. He is still unable to decide on a menu for tomorrow's late supper with his colleague. He does have more time than he had originally allowed for his preparations.

Earlier today, before Hannibal had returned to his villa to tend to his menu, there had been an unfortunate fire not far from Palazzo Pitti. Hannibal had been sitting in traffic when the sirens had sounded.

The centuries old palazzo had been nearly razed on one side, at least according to one of the *polizia* assigned to redirecting the long line of vehicles to an alternate route. Besides making it clear that access to Palazzo Pitti would be unavailable for several hours, he had also said that apparently, faulty wiring had resulted in an electrical fire that had quickly consumed half the structure in a blaze. There had been only one fatality.

Hannibal had watched the black plume of smoke rising from across the highway, stealing across the heavens to roil portentously over the city. Another historical treasure lost, a tragedy caused by human incompetence. Destruction without purpose is wasteful.

Hannibal doubts the palazzo will be restored. The owner will collect his insurance and hope he is not sued by its former occupants. Thoughts of the unfortunate palazzo evaporate as Hannibal at last finds a recipe that interests him.

A light summer meal accompanied by an exquisite Sauvignon from the Alto Adige region or a Malvasia should set Du Maurier purring. He will make a lemon risotto, chilled foie gras served with wedges of Italian cheeses and his own summer sausage. The sausage and the liver for the pâté have already been supplied by one Signora Porcelli.

To overcharge Hannibal for her carpet cleaning services had been rude but easily addressed. To learn that Signora Porcelli had continued to overcharge his neighbor whose glaucoma prohibited her from reading the bill and from appreciating the complete lack of justification for it in her home fairly begged for a remedy that Hannibal was all too happy to provide. Signora Porcelli has filled his meat locker with adequate restitution. And his neighbor loved the sausage.

As Hannibal begins to gather up the ingredients to prepare the liver, he thinks of his recent conversation with his cousin, Roberta. She is Roberto’s only child, born of a woman Hannibal never knew who was long dead by the time he had found a home with his uncle and his second wife Lady Murasaki. Roberta is an old soul though in actual years she is not much older than Hannibal. She had already left for university by the time Hannibal had arrived at the home of his uncle. Hannibal has never met her in person and thinks on how strange that is.

Roberta is the matriarch of what remains of the Lecter family in Europe. She still lives in the arrondissement of Saint Laurent, one of the twenty so called districts that spiral around Paris. It is a lively district, known for its artisans, shops, and restaurants, but it remains primarily residential and one of the more ethnically diverse arrondissements in Paris. Hannibal remembers it well.

He remembers well his parting words with his Uncle Roberto that long ago afternoon in the very same living room he had entered when he was sixteen years old, penniless and orphaned. Hannibal slices the liver into thin strips and slips them into the pan one by one as he retreats into a past he finds bittersweet at best.

1984 was an otherwise unremarkable year for Hannibal. Except that the year marked his departure from the European continent, there was nothing noteworthy about it at all. He remembers with perfect clarity the engine of the taxi running outside the luxurious flat he shared with his Uncle Roberto and Murasake, or Lady Murasake as she was known. He remembers that the third act of *The Marriage of Figaro* was playing on the stereo, an opera he finds…evocative to this day. He remembers the smell of saffron rice and steamed fish had filled the living room as he had stood before his uncle, head bowed as long locks of blonde hair had fallen over his eyes.

Uncle Roberto presses a thick manila envelope into Hannibal's hands; an envelope Hannibal knows is filled with francs of sizeable denomination. He is to exchange them for U.S. dollars in anticipation of his new life in Baltimore, in the state of Maryland, a place he has never even thought about until his acceptance letter from Johns Hopkins University.

Hannibal brushes the hair from his face and lifts his eyes to his uncle.

"There's a lot of money here, uncle. I don't know how to thank you for…"

Roberto holds up a hand and his lips curl into a smile beneath the nearly completely gray mustache. He looks to Murasake who stands in the doorway, leaning on the door jamb, silent though her dark almond eyes are focused on Hannibal.

"You are welcome to it and the only thanks we require is that you become the success we know you are capable of. To have no need to ever ask anyone for anything again. To become…what you wish to be in your new home."

Hannibal looks to the envelope in his hands and raises his eyes slowly to his uncle, a quiet rage stirs behind his eyes and he checks it quickly.

"This is not a gift. It is a bribe?"

"No! Hannibal…never a bribe!" Murasake says from the doorway, clutching her sweater around her more tightly so that the curves of her body are visible in the gloomy light of the late afternoon. These are curves Hannibal knows…intimately.

Hannibal's jaw tightens and he wills it slack again just as he wills the tears that threaten to sting his eyes to recede from his lashes before they can spill. He is getting better at willing away the emotions that would undo him.

"You are family, Hannibal." Uncle Roberto is saying, "The money is a gift to pave a way for your new life but you cannot remain here. Your passions…" Roberto glances to the doorway and Murasake lowers her eyes.

"…and your proclivities arouse a certain curiosity that you know our family cannot abide."

"Ah, yes, the sins of the father…"

"Too many sins and too many fathers in a long line of Lecters. It is unfortunate that…"

"I do not feel unfortunate. I feel empowered." Hannibal lifts his head in defiance. Who among the living is qualified to judge the dead?

"Empowered or not, you cannot remain in France, or Europe. I think you will find the United States a better fit, more suited to your particular ideas, interests, and…tastes."

Roberto takes out his pouch of tobacco from his jacket, pinches a bit and takes his time stuffing the mahogany pipe Hannibal has watched him fill a thousand times. He likes the aroma of the tobacco, slightly spicy, a hint of vanilla and he knows he will miss it.

“We only want what is best for you. That is all we have ever wanted.” Murasake says, her eyes pleading, and how softly sweetly she pleads with Hannibal from her perch in the doorway.

The horn blows from the taxi outside the flat. The driver is understandably impatient. He arrived nearly half an hour ago. This also means that Hannibal will miss his flight if he does not leave soon.

“It is time, Hannibal. I would ask one thing of you.”

“You would ask something of me as you send me away?”

“I would. You must change your name.” Roberto says with a quiet authority Hannibal knows too well.

“Why?” Hannibal already knows why but he wants to hear his uncle say it. Hearing him say it will make leaving easier.

“You know why. There is a shadow over our house and you should take a new name to begin your new life without ties to a past you no longer have to claim.”

“To break with the old as I embrace the new?”

“Exactly.”

“You would separate yourselves from me by name as well as by miles?”

“It is necessary. The past cannot follow you…”

“And the future will not find you.” Hannibal says with venom he did not know he had.

“Hannibal it is the last and only thing I would ever ask of you. The gift is yours regardless but…I ask this one thing.”

Hannibal looks to Murasake and her eyes are large and black, like a starless sky, as though they have swallowed up all the other colors and no light remains. Uncle Roberto sucks on his pipe as he lights the bowl and it flickers red beneath the match.

Hannibal looks to the mantle over the fireplace at the collection of tea cups Murasake keeps there.

The horn from the taxi blares again, longer this time, a clear signal that Hannibal is about to lose his ride to the airport.

Hannibal lifts the Queen Anne tea cup from its saucer on the mantle and watches it slip from his fingers to shatter on the flagstone. The fragile antique cup explodes into dust. Hannibal feels satisfaction warm him as Roberto flinches at the sound and Murasake, sad beautiful Murasake blanches and closes her almond eyes as she turns away from him.

“I will not.”

Hannibal slips the envelope into his bag, shoulders it, and hefts his single suitcase out the front door to the waiting taxi without a backward glance, the crack of the shattered cup still sharp in his mind.

As Hannibal steps outside, the heavens open for him and the rain that has been threatening to fall all day pours out of the sky. Hannibal feels like he has been baptized.

He has been baptized with tears from heaven; and he welcomes the cleansing that will wash this life from him, so he can emerge reborn. He climbs into the backseat and wipes heaven's tears away.

Tea cups do not shatter themselves and Hannibal has yet to put even one back together. And yet the shards of all the teacups might yield enough pieces to complete one cup, provided he could fit the pieces together. Roberta will be calling again this evening. Hannibal is hopeful that perhaps one shard is within his grasp already.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: An amusing aside, the surname Porcelli is derived from "pig" in Italian.

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Will and D'Angelo check out the fire and Daniel corrects some of D'Angelo's misperceptions about Will.

D’Angelo has so many questions she would like to ask Graham, but there is one that is foremost on her mind.
“Why do you still look for him? I mean, why does it have to be you?”
“Glutton for punishment?” Will rubs at the soot collecting around his neck. He knows D’Angelo wants an honest answer, so he will give her what he can. “I feel…responsible."
Will finally raises his head to look D’Angelo squarely in the face; her very pretty sun kissed brown eyed face. D’Angelo nods as she finishes off the rest of her water bottle.
“Maybe Doctor Clayton should help you with that in your therapy because from what I can see, you are clearly not responsible. Lecter is.”

Chapter 34

Will and D'Angelo check out the fire and Daniel corrects some of D'Angelo's misperceptions about Will.

Detective Alia D’Angelo had introduced Will as an forensic specialist from D.C. to Raphael, hoping that supplying Graham with some clout would smooth the way for him with her investigator friend. She had told Graham on the walk up what she had planned to do. He had asked only how old Raphael was. He had merely nodded when she had guessed Raphael to be about thirty-two.

Will had not told her what he had planned on doing. He had taken her little scheme and turned it around on her, which, she had to agree, had created the desired effect, but at her expense.

He had let D’Angelo make her introductions and then Graham had taken Raphael’s outstretched hand and confided quietly that he was really only one of the tenets but he did have some investigative experience. Raphael had glanced over at D’Angelo, a knowing smile on his face. D’Angelo had shrugged and looked aside. He had probably figured she had taken a shine to Graham and he respected Graham for not going along with the farce. Raphael had promptly taken Graham under his wing for the next hour, showing him whatever he asked. Which was precisely the outcome Graham had anticipated.

Graham had actually caught her eyes as he had brushed by her and with a raise of his brow and quick flash of a smile, had let her know he could handle himself just fine. A bit miffed at first, D’Angelo had slowly realized that pushing Will off as an expert, an expert *American* would have raised a challenge, like waving a red banner at a bull. Raphael would have almost certainly gotten into a pissing contest with Graham and likely been even less cooperative, despite D’Angelo being a friend.

It had not helped that D'Angelo had stupidly bragged to Will a little too loudly about how much higher the percentage of English speaking police officers was over firemen. Raphael had spoken near flawless English for Will. She had wanted to slug both of them. D'Angelo had hovered in the background feeling about as useful as the debris that smoldered around them. She had taken the opportunity to compare the Graham in front of her with the Graham she had read about.

Will was beginning to remind her of one of those misunderstood saints, favored with a gift from God but doomed to live as an outcast among his own because of it. His god given gift had seemed to get him into a lot of trouble, and driven him to the fringes of society. And, he appeared to revel in his exile; he did not try to be sociable. He seemed to prefer his own company, unwilling or unable to engage with the people around him. She had known that Graham was not going to behave like one of the crew, but D'Angelo and certainly Raphael had expected him to be more socialized. Instead, he had been polite but very reserved. Graham had elevated avoidance to an art.

Except when it came to his psychiatrist. The two of them behave as though they have known each other a long time. D'Angelo knows that is unlikely given Clayton has lived here for years and Graham arrived in the last couple months. They look enough alike to be related, but personality wise, they are quite different. She gazes at Will, his expression distant deep in his own thoughts, as he examines the exposed and melted wires that remain at the point of origin in the grim vestiges of Rossi's room.

He had already done his thing, had in fact done it three times, once in the basement, once in Rossi's suite, and finally in his own suite. She had expected something a little more dramatic.

She had watched Will mentally recreate the events of the fire that had destroyed half the palazzo effectively ruining everything he owned in the process. His hauntingly expressive eyes had swept over the remains, like a broom collecting clutter in an attempt to piece together the cruel forces that had robbed him of his lodgings and consumed his belongings. At least that is what she understands he was attempting to do with his almost psychic ability.

After visually assessing the scene, Graham had quietly stood motionless with eyes closed each time. He had stood like that for several minutes as though in a trance, breathing regularly. He had shivered a little when he had opened his eyes again, but otherwise his psychic episode was rather unremarkable.

Upon becoming fully conscious again, he had stuck his hands in his pockets and chewed at his lower lip until his eyes had finally alighted on her, blinking in surprise as though he had forgotten she was there. But as bewildered as he appeared, D'Angelo knew his mind was at work observing everything and making associations and connections effortlessly with his eidetic memory and his empathy.

She's still not sure how that works.

Graham may not be as bewildered as he appears, or as he likes to appear. Some reports would have her believe all of his mannerisms are suspect. He mimics behaviors on the spectrum to mask the dangerous psychopath inside. His apparent social awkwardness is explained as pretense, that he is fully aware of how attractive and distracting he is and he uses people's reaction to him to his advantage. D'Angelo is very assuredly fascinated.

D'Angelo is fascinated by the ability he is supposed to possess and the rumors circulating about how that ability turned him into a killer, a killer sent to seduce another killer. She has not entirely embraced the rumor mill about Graham, but she has not entirely dismissed the rumors either.

There he squats on the floor against the wall, examining the remains of the damage, remote and behaving as though he is invisible in the shadows when he must know he is anything but.

She has read up on Will Graham quite a lot since meeting him a month ago. And there was plenty to read. Perhaps he does have reason to want to be invisible. He does not have much of a fan club back home.

She had been fascinated by the Chesapeake Ripper stories. The only reason Graham's name had come up was because of his connection to the Chesapeake Ripper, some serial killing cannibal who had been a shrink in Baltimore. It was the kind of sensational crime story that could only happen in America. Reading about Graham's involvement in the case was unavoidable and his story was about as intriguing as the Ripper's.

Graham had the misfortune of being the guy who let him get away. Before that, he had been the guy who had lost his mind trying to catch him. Now it would seem he is the guy who will not let him go.

What she has read does not seem to match what she sees before her. She has read some very damning testimony from his trial. Some of it from some fancy expensive shrink named Chilton who had said Graham's entire persona was fabricated. She does not know about all that but she does not doubt the police reports she has read, or the vicious news articles she pulled up out of various archives. She cannot reconcile the troubled former FBI special agent or whatever he was with the young man on the far side of the room, with his large blue eyes that reflect an awful lot of hurt for someone so young. No matter what he is or what he may have done.

There is a quiet strength in him that reminds her of her father, a man she respected and who even now provides the litmus test for potential dates…

D'Angelo almost smacks herself. She feels her face grow hot. She wonders what is wrong with her today. Will Graham has just lost everything he owns, at least what he owns in Florence. The last thing on his mind is dinner and a movie and it should be the last thing on hers. Except it isn't. And she has moved way beyond the dinner and movie.

She should be more sensitive to his state of mind. What is it about death that makes people think of sex?

She reminds herself there's his damned shrink to consider. Clayton is legit. He is well respected in Florence and Rome. He is an excellent psychiatrist as far as she can tell. But, while Clayton is witty and she has to admit, handsome, his interest in Graham does not seem entirely professional. There is a certain protectiveness of Graham that extends beyond the doctor and patient relationship they claim. She has been trained to be observant and that training tells her there is something else going on between them. She looks at Will wondering how far that something might go.

She needs a bottle of water.

Will decides there is not much more to see here. His suite was unrecognizable. There is nothing to salvage. It had taken him several minutes to identify his laptop. He had snapped a few pictures, for Jack, but his apartment was a total loss.

Neither is there any evidence to indicate the fire was anything but accidental. An overloaded circuit had sparked and ignited the cotton fibers of the Oriental rug in Rossi's living room. She had likely plugged in one too many appliances into an extension cord and plugged that into the overloaded outlet.

Will had not been able to plug in the toaster and run his microwave at the same time without the lights flickering. But, it is the timing that bothers him. With the exception of this weekend, he has spent every single night in his suite since arriving in Florence. That Signora Rossi had picked last night to plug in multiple appliances… Will rubs at eyes that sting from too much smoke and too much thinking.

"Detective?" Will says to D'Angelo who lifts her head, "Do we know what appliances she had plugged in to the socket here?"

"They are still identifying the rubbish. They will match it up with the list she left her insurance company. If she even made a list. I can send you a report when it's done. What are you thinking?"

"I don't know…just thinking." Will rubs at his eyes some more. He can't take much more of the smoke and figures D'Angelo has had her fair share of it as well.

He should probably just be grateful providence smiled upon him for once. He should probably start thinking about somewhere else to live. He knows he can stay at Daniel's; that an offer will be forthcoming, but he also knows that staying with Daniel could easily become moving in with Daniel.

While not an entirely unpleasant thought, not by far Will acknowledges with a smile, Will is acutely aware of how emotionally draining that could prove for Daniel. For both of them. There is also the fact that he has not lived with anyone since college. He likes his space. It would appear Daniel does as well. He could certainly be living with someone if he wanted to be. Will realizes he knows nothing about Daniel's current personal life, has seen no evidence that he has a personal life…

"Got a place to stay for the next couple days?" D'Angelo appears beside him sucking on a bottle of water. She hands one to Will who accepts it gratefully. He is parched. It has been hours since he drank something besides coffee with breakfast.

Breakfast at Podere Violino seems like it was days ago. How did he get from there to this?

"Uh, Dan…Doctor Clayton is likely amenable to a…temporary imposition." Will says in between chugs of ice cold water.

"Amenable, huh? If you don't mind me asking…"

"I probably would."

"I was going to ask what you are in therapy for."

Will finishes off the water, wipes his mouth and looks around the palazzo while he speaks. He finds it unsettling to look into D'Angelo's face for very long. He is aware she stared at him shamelessly the entire time they went over the scenes. He thinks she must have read about him and can likely deduce what someone like him would be in therapy for, but her tone suggests she is genuinely curious. Will cannot be completely honest with her no matter how genuine she is. He cannot be completely honest with anyone.

"My job, my former job…with the FBI is…was physically and emotionally traumatic for me. I am trying to work through some job related issues without relying on medication. I've been on meds for the injury and I wanted to…talk through it without being on anything."

"I can understand that. I imagine it would be easier to block stuff out rather than deal, at least until you are ready. I read about what happened in Baltimore."

Will is quiet. He has said too much to her already. When she's not being pushy, those big brown eyes of hers are very…engaging. He is running out of things to focus on.

"Look, Will, there haven't been any murders here like the ones in Baltimore. There is nothing even close on the radar and I would know."

"I know that. But he would have changed his signature, his M.O. by now and most certainly his appearance." Will stares at his feet.

D'Angelo has so many questions she would like to ask Graham, but there is one that is foremost on her mind. "Why do you still look for him? I mean, why does it have to be you?"

"Glutton for punishment?" Will rubs at the soot collecting around his neck. He knows D'Angelo wants an honest answer, so he will give her what he can. "I feel…responsible."

Will finally raises his head to look D'Angelo squarely in the face; her very pretty sun kissed brown eyed face. D'Angelo nods as she finishes off the rest of her water bottle.

"Maybe Doctor Clayton should help you with that in your therapy because from what I can see, you are clearly not responsible. Lecter is."

******

Daniel stands up from his seat in the grass, wipes off his pants. He has taken advantage of the relative solitude by napping a little. He cannot shut off the emotions of the people around him, and there are a lot of people, an awful lot of people. What he can do is tune them out, so they become like white noise or like static from a radio station.

He becomes too distracted in large crowds and then he can't think clearly. If he can't think clearly he becomes anxious, extremely anxious, and he is a little too old to have panic attacks. This is why he can't go to concerts or ball games. This is why he keeps an Ipod plugged into his ears all the time. This is why he still lives with his dogs he thinks with a wry smile.

"Hey." He says, as D'Angelo and Will approach from the husk of the building that still smolders obscuring the blue sky above. "So, what's the verdict?"

"All is as it appears to be." Will says. "I guess we can go. What happens now? Who do I contact or does someone contact me?"

"See that van over there?" D'Angelo points about half way down the block, "There are officers to take down your information and coordinate with insurance companies. You contact your insurer on your own. It takes time to file all the paperwork, but if you get the forms from us first, it goes more quickly."

She glances at Daniel, "There are also some mental health personnel there, but you evidently already have your support system in place."

"You mind?" Will says to Daniel.

Daniel looks as tired as he feels. Will figures if there is a line, he'll forget about it. Let Mason eat it. Still, knowing the FBI, he'll get chewed out for the laptop. He'll get chewed out for it anyway. He has to account for the laptop. Well, Jack does. Let him explain how it got to Italy.

"I've waited this long, go ahead, Will. I'd bring the car around, but I think walking would be quicker at this point."

Will nods. It is essentially a parking lot where they are. "I'll be right back."

Daniel gives D'Angelo the once over after Will has put some distance between them. She is very cute in her sooty little outfit with the smudges of ash on her cheeks and arms. Her head comes to about his nose, even with the heels. Daniel wonders why she wore such impractical shoes to a fire. Bad shoe judgment aside; she does seem to have the self-assuredness to handle Will. Given her warm fuzzy feelings, she is thinking about him right now as she watches him approach the van.

D'Angelo feels Clayton looking at her even though she pretends to gaze around. She thinks now would be a good time to get some answers while Will is occupied. She takes a breath and turns to speak her mouth already open and forming the words when Clayton abruptly turns to her.

"Oh. You were about to say something?" Daniel asks, knowing full well she was.

"No, go ahead. You first." D'Angelo snaps her mouth shut.

"Well, about these crime scene discussions you've had…"

"What about them? You trying to tell me how to do my job?" D'Angelo eyes blaze right up and Daniel feels her anger like a pin prick, quick and sharp.

"No, no…but it is *your* job – not his. Not anymore. I am trying to do my job and getting him involved in crime scenes is not helping."

"He's good at it. He offered…"

Daniel gives her a hard look at that remark and she purses her lips. He decides to let it go. He would rather have her cooperation than set off her temper which seems pretty easy to do.

"Detective…" Daniel sighs, he should not have to spell this out for her but, "What do you think profiling crime scenes does to him? I mean, what do you think he's in therapy for?"

"He said to talk through his recent injury. And you took him off his meds?"

Daniel rolls his eyes. He has no idea what bullshit Will told her. "He did not want to become addicted to pain meds, and he doesn't like the way anti-depressants make him feel. But thinking about crime scenes and the crimes, is harmful to him. Psychologically."

"What do you mean exactly? I know he thought about that Ripper case so much he got in too deep, got himself hurt over it. He sees all the clues and evidence in his head, like a big computer, no?"

"No." Daniel cannot believe she doesn't understand. Will must not have told her much at all.

"He feels it. He recreates it in his head and he feels what the killer and victim feel, what they think. Can you imagine what it's like trying to go about your own life after that? Trying to fall asleep after that?"

D'Angelo throws her head back and looks up at the dark cloud overhead. She cannot imagine what Graham must go through. She has a tough time shaking off the sight of crime scenes some nights. She thinks how he did it with her watching just this afternoon. He was not only gathering evidence, he was experiencing it.

"Alia, he can think like anyone, anytime, all the time. He is…unique. I've never had a patient like him, never met anyone like him."

Daniel looks away from her to give some time to process. He watches for Will, not wanting to have him wander back up to them, unnoticed, to hear them talking about him.

D'Angelo thinks if he can think like anyone, he can think like her, like his shrink even. She figures that must make for interesting therapy sessions. She realizes he does pretend to be afflicted with certain social disorders, but because he needs a buffer when he deals with people. Not because he is a raging psychopath.

Merda! Graham must be seeing Clayton because he is still haunted by thoughts of the Ripper. More than just thoughts apparently. He is apparently trying very hard not to be a raging psychopath.

"Mio Dio. I…I didn't realize…how could I? How is that even possible? No wonder…"

"No wonder he's in therapy? Now you know. And you should keep that to yourself. I told you because…"

"Because you want me to understand how important it is that he stop. But he keeps doing it, doesn't he?"

"He likes to help. It was his job for a long time. But his job nearly cost him his life and his mind."

D'Angelo is quiet for a change. This Clayton is right. She supposes Graham may seem more together than he actually is. She does not believe someone with Graham's resume would casually be in therapy. There is clearly much more to his ordeal than she knows and much more than either Clayton or Graham is willing to tell.

"Look Alia," Daniel doesn't smile or try to look charming. He knows that his physical assets do not move her at all. "If you care about him, and I get the feeling that you do…"

Daniel pauses. She actually blushed just now.

“Be a friend. Or…ask him out.”

“Ask him out?”

D’Angelo feels embarrassed suddenly. She could not be that obvious, could she? Her heart skips a beat as she wonders if Will picked up on it. She cringes clear down to her soiled toes.

“Yeah. Why not? Maybe even fuck him.”

Daniel almost laughs at the look on her face. The look and the tingle of heat he feels from her confirm she has already thought about that. Quite a lot.

D’Angelo stares at Clayton. Her face is beyond warm. She looks to the van to see if Will is still talking and filling out forms. He is on his way back. She looks back to Clayton and wonders what his angle is. She decides to test the water and see if he’ll bite.

“I thought maybe you already had.” She stares stubbornly into the imperturbable sea of green.

“Had what?” Daniel does smile now.

“Fucked him.”

“Really. Well, I wouldn’t let a little thing like that stop me.”

“A little thing, huh?” D’Angelo smiles rather broadly like a piranha. Teeth and all.

“Ah, walked right into that one.” Daniel looks up and sees Will approaching. He nods his head and D’Angelo rolls her eyes, turns to look at the building, again. She composes herself before turning back around.

Will is showing the forms to Daniel when she does. Daniel does not look up or give any indication that they spoke at all. She wonders how he does that so easily and figures it must come with his profession. Clayton is not what she expected. Neither of them is.

“If you’ve had enough for one day, I know I have.” D’Angelo says.

“Yeah, about time to pack it in. Thank you, Detective, for all your help today. I mean it.” Daniel says. He does mean it. He likes D’Angelo or at least she is growing on him. She manages a cool smile.

Daniel figures Will must be very distracted not to notice D’Angelo’s composure is fractured.

“Yes,” Will says, folding the papers up and sticking them in his back pocket, more rolled than folded and sticking up over his belt. “Until next time.”

Will smiles not knowing what else to say. He looks back and forth between the two of them, senses something hanging in the air and figures they must have had some words. D’Angelo had made no secret of her impatience with Daniel. Will finds this odd given that Daniel is way more sociable than he is. She does seem to have a problem with male authority figures and as his shrink, Daniel must present as such to her. He shrugs it off.

“You know where to find me if you need to.” D’Angelo decides to leave before she says something really stupid. Or, before she delivers a parting shot at Clayton. She muzzles it, reluctantly.

D’Angelo walks off, very tired and more than a little dazed. She knows she will be replaying this afternoon over in her head as she falls into her bed this evening. She is so tired; she may not wait until evening. Her shift was over hours ago. She had waited for Will Graham. And as she walks away, she decides she was not disappointed. She will see him again.

Daniel watches D’Angelo walk towards the barrage of fire trucks and assorted other emergency vehicles. He looks at Will who is watching her, too.

“She turned out pretty nice for a cop.” Daniel says.

“Yep.” Will replies, full of his usual wit. Daniel senses the tiredness in Will, can feel it in himself. The emotional roller coaster today is taking its toll.

“You are not thinking of going anywhere but my place, right?” Daniel says. “You have to be completely spent about now.”

“Just about. Found yourself another stray, huh?”

“Yeah, and you’ll fit right in. C’mon, let’s get outa here, go get cleaned up, get something to eat…to drink.”

“I could use a drink.” Will says. “Several, in fact.”

Neither of them speaks as they walk back to the Mercedes. Daniel feels the sense of loss and the fatigue from Will. There is a heavy knot in his chest that twinges a little when he looks into Will’s face. He lets Will slouch, silent and deep in thought, against the open window as he drives back to Fiesole. Daniel does not feel much like talking either. Nothing like losing everything you own to ruin an otherwise truly fantastic weekend. Daniel feels relief more than anything; relief that Will was not home when that fire started. There was nothing Will could have done though he might have tried, knowing Will.

Daniel is very grateful that Will had not been home; grateful that Will had been with him.

Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Aftermath of the fire, Will and Daniel settle in. Daniel gets a call from Du Maurier.

"You know you can stay as long as you need. I don't expect you to recover from this tomorrow."

A long sigh drifts from Will as he leans against the door jamb, one foot in and one foot out of Daniel's bedroom. Daniel thinks Will finds himself in that position more often than he would like, perpetually on the precipice of something or other.

"Seems like you are stuck with me for a little while. I'm going need some clothes of my own though." Will tugs at the collar of his tee.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 35

Aftermath of the fire, Will and Daniel settle in. Daniel gets a call from Du Maurier or Dumont as he knows her.

Will sits on the couch in the living room reading over the insurance forms. Daniel is upstairs taking his long overdue turn in the shower.

He and Daniel had unpacked the car, dragged everything inside without saying too much. The dogs had gone nuts, and while Daniel had seen to their walk and their dinner, Will had wandered around the house in a daze, a tumbler two fingers full of whiskey in his hand, just observing and allowing his mind to acclimate to the idea that he would be staying here before finally stripping off the filthy clothes and hopping in the shower.

He had almost fallen asleep under the steady stream of hot water and had to let cold water splash all over him so he wouldn't be tempted to crawl into bed and pass out. That…would have been rude.

While the idea of staying here with Daniel is comforting, Will understands this gives Daniel virtually unlimited access to him. The multiple sessions a week had been taxing enough. Will had at least been able to leave, put some distance between them. This weekend has unalterably changed the dynamic between them. He glances down at himself, at Daniel's pale blue tee and boxers that fit snugly around his body.

Will doesn't know if he should groan or laugh. In the space of two days he has gone from seeing his psychiatrist to sleeping with him, both literally and euphemistically. And now, within the last couple hours, he has found himself homeless. He has to call Jack. He needs to open that email from the Paolini twins. He can't wait to fall into a fitful sleep and dream about Hannibal. He feels incredibly vulnerable. He feels…raw.

He looks in the fridge and closes the door back up again. He opens the liquor cabinet, considers another drink, and then closes that door back up again. He decides the sandwiches and iced tea were enough to go to sleep on. He is unspeakably tired. He should turn out the light and go on up to bed.

He heard Daniel shut the water off a few minutes ago. Bella is stretched out in her crate at the other end of the living room near the kitchen. Daniel is clearly not coming back downstairs tonight. He is already collapsed upon his bed, Cara at his feet. Will tosses the papers on the coffee table and turns out the light.

Daniel sets his alarm and shoves Cara off his pillow. "Scoot. Scoot. Points for trying though. Missed me didja?" He buries his face in her neck and runs his hands along her back and is rewarded with the thumping of her tail.

"Are you making out with your dog?" Will laughs from the doorway.

"Oh yeah, just got to second base…" Daniel flips Cara over and rubs her belly. "I uh, have to go into the office tomorrow. Mondays are nuts, you know after a weekend people need their shrink. I could reschedule Tuesday's patients if I need to…"

"No, no. Unless you want to catch up on your sleep. Don't cancel patients on my account."

"You know you can stay as long as you need. I don't expect you to recover from this tomorrow."

A long sigh drifts from Will as he leans against the door jamb, one foot in and one foot out of Daniel's bedroom. Daniel thinks Will finds himself in that position more often than he would like, perpetually on the precipice of something or other.

"Seems like you are stuck with me for a little while. I'm going need some clothes of my own though." Will tugs at the collar of his tee.

"We'll go shopping downtown Florence. But, until then, we seem about the same size so help yourself."

"Your closet…not really my style…"

"Oh, well then, you can always go without…" Daniel grins.

An exasperated huff comes from the doorway. "I'm sure I can manage with your summer wardrobe a few days."

"Ok. The house smells like smoke so you can have laundry duty while I'm gone tomorrow but if you just want to sleep all day, go ahead. Trauma is no joke and you have been traumatized today."

"This? This hardly qualifies as trauma. Barely a blip on my screen." Will smiles a tired smile.

“Yeah, right. It’s late. I can hardly keep my eyes open.” Daniel clicks off the light on the night stand. “Goodnight, Will” Daniel says to the darkened room.

The bed sinks on the far side. Will sits on the bed stroking Cara in the dim light from the street lamp.

“No guest room?” Daniel asks as his head hits the pillow.

Will slides into bed next to him, pulls the sheet up. “I would just find myself in here eventually.”

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“Buongiorno!” Maria greets Daniel on his way up the back stairs to his office. He waves and smiles but does not want to engage Maria, not this early. He needs more coffee first.

“How was your weekend? You went on your fishing trip didn’t you?”

“Yes, and everything was great. Thanks again for arranging for the gear and handling all the expenses.”

“You wouldn’t know what to do without me.” She says moving to stand at the bottom of the stairs. She can see the print of Raphael’s *Triumph of Galatea* from where she stands.

“You look a little rough this morning. Quite a weekend, Hmmmm?”

“It was rather eventful, yes.” He does not need to be reminded of how rough he looks; he feels rough, like a hundred miles of bad road rough. Daniel figures she probably has not realized the fire mentioned in the paper this morning was Will’s residence. She will eventually, but Daniel has patients to see, his first already sits in one of the couches in the lobby sipping an espresso.

“I should get upstairs so you can send Signora Carnivale up.” Daniel turns to resume his walk up the steps with feet that feel incredibly heavy this morning. He holds the cup of coffee in his hands tightly and wonders how many more cups it will take to really wake him up.

“Any more arrows find you this weekend?” Maria’s playful voice follows him up the stairs.

Daniel stops on the steps, turns around to face Maria. He knows she means well and she is teasing him, but he has allowed too much latitude in this regard and if he does not enforce some limits she will continue until she says something truly inappropriate, probably in front of other people and she will not be able to walk it back.

Daniel is also not in the mood for it. Not at all. He shared in Will’s anxiety soaked dreams again last night and found sleep a rare commodity. He reminds himself not for the first time he has to get Will to talk about his dreams. Daniel might be able to make sense of his own if he understood the images that sent Will to clenching at his sheets.

“Maria, my therapy with Mr. Graham is confidential. It is also not a casual topic of conversation and it is deserving of more than innuendo.”

“Doctor Clayton! I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Well of course you did, Maria. Mr. Graham is my patient. You will not discuss him with me or anyone for that matter.”

“Aren’t you in a mood this morning?”

“Maria…enough already.”

“Not discuss him? A little hard to do when he comes in here three times a week. None of your patients get that many sessions a week with you.”

“His particular issues require more time and that is all you need to know. And Maria…” Daniel’s voice trails off as she moves away from the bottom of the stairs, either distracted by something or ticked off at his tone. Well, he’s little ticked off, too.

“Maria?”

“Yes, Doctor Clayton?”

“You may cancel Mr. Graham’s afternoon sessions.”

“For how long?”

Maria’s face is tight. Daniel knows she is right now wondering what happened this weekend to cause the change in scheduling.

“Indefinitely.” Daniel says watching her face twitch as her mind scrambles for explanations. He climbs the rest of the stairs and savors the quiet of his office before he tells the receptionist to send up Carnevale.

Two patients later, it is nearly lunchtime. Daniel wonders what Will is doing. Hopefully, he’s just taking it easy and catching up on whatever it is he needs to do. Daniel had told him he was welcome to anything in the house, including his laptop. He hopes to be able to talk with Will about the files from his Italian investigators in France with news of Lecter or his family when he gets home this evening.

Daniel likes associating home with Will. Despite the events that brought him there, Daniel is pleased that Will is there.

Daniel’s desk phone beeps. The receptionist downstairs interrupts his thoughts to tell him there is a Doctor Dumont holding for him on line two.

“Hello. This is Doctor Clayton.”

“Ah, I am pleased to get hold of you this morning. I am calling about my patient, Lydia.”

“How is she?”

“As well as can be expected, she has her good days and bad days. This weekend was more of the latter.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“We talked about your ideas for therapy and she is open to trying. When would you be available for a session?” Du Maurier breathes into the phone. Daniel can hear some classical piece of music in the background. He recognizes Ravel’s *Boléro* and thinks that an odd piece to play at eleven in the morning.

“Good. Let’s hope a little canine bonding helps with her feeling so isolated. I’ll look at my schedule. Were you thinking about next week?”

“Actually I was hoping for something this week, if there is some way you could fit her in.”

“Well, I did have some rescheduling in the afternoons this week. One hour long session around 4 any day you like.” Daniel decides Lydia can have one of Will’s sessions. He certainly won’t be coming in to the office for a while.

“I had an idea about our initial consult with Lydia. She has not been in an office setting for over a year now and I thought if you wouldn’t mind a house call…

“A house call? Lydia does understand she is seeing a doctor. Going to the doctor’s office is pretty standard. If she has some issue with sessions in an office setting you might have mentioned it earlier.”

Daniel shakes his head and is glad Dumont can’t see his face as he speaks. Why does this have to be so damned complicated?

“She would like to meet you with some dogs if that is possible. She thought she should experience the therapy in a place where she is comfortable and I agree.”

Daniel is trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice but it is pretty difficult with Dumont switching things up on him. Lydia is sounding less and less like a young adult with problems and more and more like a spoiled and indulged child. Daniel is wondering how many of her issues might have been avoided if someone had simply told her “no” a long time ago.

“I take it she has more issues than you had time to discuss previously. Which issues do you want the canine therapy to focus on?”

“Her main issues are as I described, and we agreed that her tendency toward suicide and other attention seeking behaviors would be the targets of the canine therapy. That has not changed.

“Ok. Because its efficacy would be limited by multiple goals. Too much expectation is counter-productive.” Daniel says to Dumont, Ravel’s overly long opus still playing in the background.

“Well, to that end I was thinking that since you live in Fiesole and her father’s winery and estate are just outside, that you might be willing to bring dogs out there and we could have the session on the grounds.”

Daniel thinks this is highly indulgent behavior and his instinct is to disagree, but he also knows the family. At least he knows a little about them and understands that if Lydia does not want to go a doctor’s office, that somehow the doctor will be persuaded to come to her. Her therapy must be awfully expensive.

“What did you have in mind?” Daniel asks thinking that a therapy session at the patient’s home will run quite a bit longer than an hour. And then there is the travel time.

“Perhaps this weekend? Or late afternoon on Friday? Can you bring dogs on such short notice?”

“Lydia understands these are therapy dogs? That they are trained?”

“Oh, yes, she understands they are for therapy.”

“Does she understand this is an initial consult to see how she responds to the dogs? And how the dogs respond to her?”

“Of course. And if all goes well, you will pair her with a dog that fits her needs and personality. Lydia will want a puppy of course…”

“Lydia will have what I decide she should have.”

Daniel waits for Dumont to argue or at least express irritation at his tone. He does not care if she takes umbrage to his attitude or not. This therapy is quickly becoming a nuisance and he does have other concerns and patients. He thinks Dumont is the type to press an advantage and would have no problem monopolizing his time as she clearly allows Lydia to monopolize hers.

Daniel does not let any of his patients monopolize his time… Daniel frowns. That…is not entirely true, is it?

“I think Lydia might benefit from your style of therapy Doctor Clayton.” Dumont says after a thoughtful pause, and Daniel can imagine her lips drawn into that tight smile he had noticed by the pool.

“I hope so. As for the dogs, I can bring two dogs this weekend. I’d rather not do it on a Friday, after working here.”

“Wonderful. Does Saturday afternoon work for you, say around three?”

“I can make that happen. Do I just show up at the gate?’

“I can send a car for you. But you have to transport the dogs, don’t you?”

“Yes. Just let me know where you want to me go, and I will be there.”

“Well then, I will call you with directions. I am so pleased we could make this happen soon. I am most grateful.”

Daniel is not sure for whom she is grateful, herself or Lydia. Daniel gets the feeling that Lydia is not only one he is accommodating.

“I look forward to hearing from you. Ciao, Doctor Dumont.”

“Ciao, Doctor Clayton.” Dumont says in her clipped accent.

Daniel does not usually introduce the patients to the dogs until after an initial session to go over expectation about the goals of the therapy and expectations about the dogs. Dumont seems to have some sort of timetable imposed on her to account for her pushiness. Then again, she just may be pushy in general. Daniel decides he will worry about it Saturday.

Right now, he has to get through the rest of this horrible Monday. He looks to the phone on his desk and thinks about calling Will, but decides to leave him alone, give him his space. Will would call him if anything was wrong. It’s almost eleven-thirty. Daniel hopes Will is settling in.

Chapter End Notes

The next couple chapters have Will experience odd dreams or hallucinations at Daniel’s house. Hannibal’s will have a conversation with his cousin, Roberta, and dinner with Du Maurier wherein both the vipers play a little quid pro quo. I am out of state visiting family and the atmosphere is conducive to neither solitude nor concentration. I will do my best to post next weekend. D'Angelo does have a roll to play and it is always good to have a friend in law enforcement especially if you are ex-FBI on the trail of an intelligent psychopath.

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

> Will takes a trip through his own memory palace and sees some images that seem more like hallucinations than dreams. He loses time again while checking out Daniel’s piano.
>
> The occasions at the harpsichord he had shared with Hannibal seem now to have occurred on a different wavelength, within a different universe almost. The universe of the Ripper, of Jack and the FBI, and of reckonings had disappeared, replaced by an alternate universe where Will sat playing an eighteenth century Flemish harpsichord sipping brandy in borrowed pajamas at one in the morning with a brandy sipping serial killing cannibal in pajamas nuzzling at his neck. It had been a surprisingly comfortable universe where the two of them actually just talked and played, and at least for the duration of the music; it was the other universe that had seemed mad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 36

Will takes a trip through his own memory palace and sees some images that seem more like hallucinations than dreams. He loses time again while checking out Daniel’s piano.

You want me to see good in Hannibal?

If it helps you see the good in yourself, then yes.

Will sits at Daniel's piano, skimming his bare feet along the pedals as he contemplates his discussion with Daniel from the car yesterday. The caress of his feet across the pedals floods his consciousness with memories like an overflowing stream running concurrently with the stream of now. Will lets the now slip away like one of his lures helplessly adrift as the reel spins in his hands.

He runs his fingers over the ivory keys thinking of the last time his fingers graced ivory. That would be Hannibal's black keyed harpsichord. The eighteenth century Flemish harpsichord that sat in the far corner of the salon upon the polished marble had often provided the setting for softly spoken subterfuge over snifters of brandy. The best deceptions are couched in truths and Will knows that embedded in the deceptions they had traded with each other, behind the metaphors and beneath the artifice, they had also exchanged glimpses into each other. Hannibal had revealed himself in snatches as had Will.

They were, each of them alone. Loneliness, a singular emotion they had in common, had been painfully apparent to each of them in those snatches and glimpses. Perhaps the shared aloneness is what had prompted the honest revelations that occasionally found expression amidst the artful parleys they exchanged with each other. But unlike the dinner table or the chairs in Hannibal's office, the bench at the harpsichord forced them to sit side by side, and when they played the carefully calibrated instrument, the need to take up a position and hold it seemed to dissipate with the music. The physical closeness had resonated deep inside to allow genuine enjoyment to surface unmarred by the contest of wills that usually marked their conversations.

The duets had marked a sincere collaboration born of a mutual desire to experience harmony in their discordant partnership and for a stolen moment neither had held sway over the other.

The occasions at the harpsichord he had shared with Hannibal seem now to have occurred on a different wavelength, within a different universe almost. The universe of the Ripper, of Jack and the FBI, and of reckonings had disappeared, replaced by an alternate universe where Will sat playing an eighteenth century Flemish harpsichord sipping brandy in borrowed pajamas at one in the morning with a brandy sipping serial killing cannibal in pajamas nuzzling at his neck. It had been a surprisingly comfortable universe where the two of them actually just talked and played, and at least for the duration of the music; it was the other universe that had seemed mad.

These were moments when Will truly questioned whether he was engaged in a reckoning or a becoming. And the question lingers still.

Will does not remember how the marble floored salon with enough art and décor to rival a museum became their sacred space where reality was anathema and talk of their associates was taboo. He thinks the custom might have started one evening after dinner, after that first weekend he had spent almost exclusively at Hannibal's home making a monument of Tier. Will had wandered into the salon while leaving Hannibal to his kitchen and his culinary compulsions.

Will's fingers stroke the keys at Daniel's piano as he recalls the notes for Beethoven's *Für Elise*, one of the more simple compositions Will had attempted on Hannibal's harpsichord. The piece was not really suited for harpsichord but slowing the tempo had helped. Will had not noticed Hannibal listening from the doorway, tea towel in hand as he polished a wine glass, until the movement of his shadow had caught Will's attention. Hannibal had disappeared back into the kitchen but had returned a moment later sans towel and glass.

He had crossed the room with a casual yet commanding gait in trousers and socks with his shirt unbuttoned to his navel and sleeves still rolled up to stand beside Will at the bench. Will had responded to the simple lift of his chin and the subtle softening of his eyes by scooting to one side to allow Hannibal to take a seat at the lower octaves. Hannibal had glanced at the sheet music once and then proceeded to play the bass clef notes of Beethoven's most popular solo piano piece waiting for Will to join in.

Will had hesitated and Hannibal had repeated his notes and his invitation with nimble fingers and Will had let his right hand float above the keys until he counted the correct measure to join in. It had taken only seconds for Will to relax against the warm shoulder next to his and for the next several minutes, only the music had existed.

After that, the harsh realities existing beyond the gates of 5 Chandal Square never intruded upon their time in the acoustically perfect salon where notes and words ascended to the ceiling and floated away. For the space of a sonata there had been no universe but theirs. As unsustainable as it was, their universe remained sacrosanct until…Will leaves the thought unfinished.

Will had never been able to mentally catalog everything in Hannibal's salon and he knew Hannibal put items away and replaced those items with yet others, possibly to keep him stimulated. It had worked. The salon had been Will's favorite room in the house. Walking around it had been like strolling through the Smithsonian. The cultured side of Hannibal had been on display, not to mask the violence that was part of him, but rather to augment it and, Will thinks, shine light on the darkness inside Hannibal.

Will had advised Chilton to shine a light on his relationship with Hannibal. He had told Chilton that Hannibal worked in the shadows and denying Hannibal his shadows was the only way to expose him. After Miriam Lass had suffered a complete meltdown and shot Chilton, mistaking him for her abuser, Will had ignored his own advice and had joined Hannibal in the shadows believing *that* the only way to catch him, to lure him. *That* had worked out so well…Will does not hop on that train of thought either.

But actually, there in Hannibal's salon among all the books and art and music Hannibal had lurked also. Hannibal did not always operate in the shadows. Sometimes he sat in plain sight.

Ever the willing mentor, Hannibal had opened himself up to Will in that grand salon. He had invited Will to know him, to see him through the literature and art that formed the foundation of Hannibal's universe. Nothing Hannibal did with Will or for Will was without an element of instruction. Or persuasion. In Hannibal's universe they were one and the same.

If Will could recreate those duets and conversations in his mind, could use his imagination to recreate the contents of that room, he could shine a light on the dark corners of Hannibal's mind that continued to elude him. Will thinks of his recent dreams and the way the dark scaly eagle always manages to stay ahead of him. Is he chasing it or following it?

His reimagining of Hannibal could also benefit from a look at that email from the Paolini twins. Too bad the internet was down or whatever was causing that damned yellow exclamation point to obliterate the access bars icon on the tool bar of Daniel's laptop. Any scrap of information on

Hannibal's family or his past would contribute to the Hannibal that continues to evolve in his subconscious and manifest in his dreamscapes. Light and dark. Good and evil.

He recognizes Daniel is trying to frame good and evil as fluid concepts rather than as absolutes because Daniel has recognized that Hannibal does not see good and evil as absolute concepts. Hannibal does not define either concept in any traditional sense. Will used to, but he's not sure that he does anymore.

I've given up good and evil for behaviorism.

Then you can't say that I'm evil.

You're destructive. Same thing?

Evil is just destructive? Storms are evil if it's that simple.

As Daniel had pointed out, everything is relative, even good and evil. Good and evil are human constructs imposed on human behaviors and motivations since the dawn of civilization. Will has never been especially religious. He understands the function religion plays in societies but had never given much thought to the role of faith in his own life. Or the absence of it. Will has always found acts attributed to the Almighty to be arbitrary at best.

I liked killing Hobbs.

Killing must feel good to God too he does it all the time. And are we not created in his image?

Depends on who you ask.

God is terrific. He dropped a church roof on 34 of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn.

And did God feel good about that?

He felt powerful.

Leave it to Hannibal to frame Will's own doubts so eloquently. Will learned early on that his prayers often went unanswered and he had found little to no comfort in words that rang hollow at every funeral he had ever attended. Will had considered his lack of faith might have something to do with God's lack of response to his prayers over the years, but he had also observed the same absence of intervention among the pious. And yet he found himself uttering a prayer now and again in case someone was listening.

I prayed I would see Abigail again…

Hannibal giveth and Hannibal taketh away. Nothing like a lover scorned to bring out Old Testament style retribution. He wonders if the fact that he can rationalize and understand Hannibal's actions means that he does empathize with Hannibal.

Don't confuse empathy with understanding, Jack…

Don't let empathy confuse what you want with what Lecter wants.

Did he? Does he still? Or does he cloak his desires in confusion so he doesn't really have to look upon the soiled raiment beneath? Just like Hannibal's meals were so much easier to swallow down if he didn't really think about them too much. But he had thought about them as he had chewed and swallowed every morsel on his plate. He had shared in Hannibal's destruction and creation; consuming the ritual sacrifice no longer as oblivious guest, but as participant.

Will had known how the act of consumption was Hannibal's way of undoing the perpetrators who had offended his peculiar sensibilities. They were never truly vanquished unless they had been ceremoniously eaten, consumed, and made a part of him. Eating flesh was a sensuous and carnal experience, as sensuous and carnal as the act of sex. Hannibal is a connoisseur of flesh and his association of flesh with sustenance and of eating with sex had been clear enough to Will.

Hannibal had made his associations clear to anyone who paid attention. Will figures most people ignored what was right in front of them all the time. The placement of erotic imagery around the eating areas of the house was not accidental or thoughtless or random. The act of consuming flesh in all its forms was a sublime act.

Is this meat an act of god, Will?

Will's offering of his own flesh to Hannibal that night after killing Tier had been a consummation of sorts. Like the human flesh Hannibal had prepared lovingly in his kitchen, Will had been similarly prepared albeit with much more adoration. Will had known Hannibal's desires, had known for a while, and he had allowed Hannibal to strip, bathe, rinse, tenderize, and metaphorically eat his flesh that evening.

He had known how much his acquiescence would please Hannibal and how his act of surrendering would gain Hannibal's trust. Will had not been prepared for how letting go in that bed would affect him, or how incredibly easy it would be. Hannibal had seen a flawless transformation because it had been genuine. Will had discovered that following the urges he had kept down for so long, giving in to his impulses and recognizing them for the inspirations that they were had been both deliciously exhilarating and terrifying.

Hannibal had encouraged him to become intimate with his instincts. He had not only manufactured events for that purpose; Hannibal had also been grooming him, conditioning him all along. After Will had sent Matthew Brown to kill him, Hannibal had decided Will was something more than a curiosity, a pet project. Apparently, Hannibal had found Will's newfound violent urges compelling enough to kill a judge and remove enough doubt about the fabricated copycat to get Will out of the jam he had placed him in. And when Will had resumed his therapy of his own volition, Hannibal must have taken that as his cue to become the mentor.

Will kicks at the pedals. Hannibal had also fallen in love with his would be pupil. How did Will feel about that? Hannibal had manipulated Will into becoming intimate with his instincts. And Will had loved that intimacy, had felt the awful seductive power of it, and there had been moments when he had loved Hannibal for it, had felt a connection to him. Hannibal had essentially raped his mind, and not just once, but over and over. Will has feelings for him still, and Will cannot reconcile the love with the hate; cannot reconcile his sense of justice with the inhumanity of Hannibal's deeds.

And yet, Hannibal always had a response to Will's righteousness. Hannibal had never tried to purge Will of his righteous anger rather he had always offered an alternative to Will's rigid perspective. Hannibal had tried to persuade his pupil. To what end? Daniel had asked Will to consider a similar question.

You have to ask yourself what it is he wanted from you.

Hannibal would have played mentor to his pupil for a finite period of time. What had Hannibal envisioned beyond that? The idea of family had been laid waste on his kitchen floor. But Hannibal had not killed him for a reason. If Hannibal had wanted Will dead that night; Will would already be dead. He had left Will with the choice of going quietly into the stream or…what?

Will had been prepared to walk quietly into that stream. Baltimore's paramedics are apparently very well trained.

Will does know what Hannibal did not want from him. Hannibal had not wanted Will to provide him with a version of himself. And most of the time, that is exactly what Hannibal got. It is what Hannibal must have glimpsed in the cracks of Will's façade that had guided his surgeon's hands to avoid every vital organ in Will's body as he had ripped open his flesh.

Adopting Hannibal's mannerisms and thinking had been relatively easy. Will had used his gift to maintain the essence of Hannibal's persona when he was with Hannibal. But thinking like Hannibal was not the same thing as feeling his feelings. Will wonders if his imagination had overtaken him so completely that he had overwritten his own emotions with his version of Hannibal. Or had the act of slipping into Hannibal's skin finally aroused the emotions and instincts he had been able to push away and keep down?

Will had empathized so closely with Hobbs that he imagined Hobbs eating and showering at the same time as he. He had crawled so far into Hobbs' pathology and psyche that Will had felt intense guilt over the victims, like a part of him had actually killed all those girls while another part had stood watching in horror. If he could do that with Hobbs in a matter of days, Will is beginning to realize the magnanimity of what he has truly subjected himself to with Hannibal.

He knows that Daniel has already guessed that a part of Will eagerly participated in Hannibal's therapy and welcomed the previously unacknowledged urges. The question remains how much of Will's transformation had been abetted by Hannibal's drug induced conditioning while he had been sick. Will has always harbored violent feelings and urges, but who really set them free?

This was the big question he wrestled with all the time. As Daniel had pointed out Will had a central fear and all his other fears stemmed from this. All of Will's doubts thread through his mind winding and weaving their way into this one tapestry of fear.

The savagery he had experienced with Tier had been a long time coming. His desire for violence and intimacy that had found expression with Hannibal had been honest and raw and the culmination of either the most brilliant demonstration of psychic driving ever, or the awakening of a side of Will that was as much a part of him as the rest.

How could doing something so bad feel so good? Will had expected to hate himself in the morning, but he had not. He had awakened with a whole new set of issues to ponder and fret over. It hadn't helped that the object of his afflictions had lain beside him, a subtle pleased smiled about his lips while twirling locks of Will's hair around warm fingers. He had felt plenty of hatred for Hannibal up to that point. He had felt an unbelievable amount of self-loathing. His actions regarding Tier were criminal and punishable by law. His surrender in that bed, a necessary punishment, was the price paid to bring Hannibal to justice. What did it mean to enjoy the punishment?

What did it mean to enjoy the company of the architect of all the madness?

Hannibal was equally capable of acts of compassion as he was violence. And why not? God was a capricious deity, always dropping the roofs of his churches on the faithful while songs of worship fell from their lips. Like god, Hannibal was beyond measure in wanton malice and matchless in his irony.

Every creative act has its destructive consequence, Will.

Will understands Hannibal's manipulations and scheming are played out on a cosmic stage because Hannibal sees himself at the center of a universe where he is both creator and destroyer. Hannibal believes he embodies both good and evil. He does not prefer one over the other. Rather, the universe bends to his will. He is no more or no less than a force of nature, a primordial element, like an ancient deity.

Christians do not have a monopoly on capricious deities. Will thinks of Hannibal's fascination with mythology evident in his art selections and his own drawings. Will cannot recall without smiling the numerous works of art that had received alterations beneath Hannibal's brush.

Images of the art in Hannibal's house flip through the rolodex of Will's mind as his fingers find the notes on the keyboard of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, memory guiding both actions simultaneously. His conscious mind continues to dissect and rearrange past conversations seeking new insights as fingers glide over the worn ivory of Daniel's baby grand.

Hannibal's pathology requires a much larger tableau than Christianity. Hannibal's narcissism draws upon a deeper theological well. Hannibal is epic. Hannibal is theatrical. Hannibal sees his actions in mythical proportions. Will thinks of the shores of Aulis and his ancient Greek dreamscape. Homer's *Iliad* is not the only fount from which Hannibal's wellspring of narcissism flows.

Whenever he's mentioned in the Iliad, Patroclus seems to be defined by his empathy.

He became Achilles on the field of war. He died for him there, wearing his armor.

He did. Hiding and revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics.

As are battle-tested friendships.

Achilles wished all Greeks would die, so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone.

Will thinks on Hannibal's words. At the time, Will had been more focused on the transparent allusion to his relationship with Hannibal, as Hannibal had likely anticipated by presenting Will with that charcoal sketch. But there was something more. Hiding and revealing identity *was* a common theme for the Greeks. What had Hannibal really been alluding to? And what other epic Greek themes would appeal to Hannibal's immense ego?

Will looks up from the piano to see Cara and Bella lying at his feet, their wet noses tickling his toes. He looks at the clock on the mantel. Barely eleven. As Will scans Daniel's bookshelves he thinks talking to Daniel more about Hannibal's pathology would be a good idea. The volume of titles on psychology is rivaled only by history with literature running a close second. The more Will examines the titles the wider his grin becomes. It looks like Daniel took many of the same college courses as he did.

Will sighs and turns his attention back to the keyboard. He glances again at Daniel's laptop on the table and frowns at the annoying yellow blob that still hides the internet access bars on the toolbar.

Daniel did ask him to consider the good in Hannibal. Will knows he has been thinking around the topic. His conversations with Hannibal about good and evil had left Will with the impression that Hannibal operated outside of such mundane mortal considerations. Daniel is aware of this. Will kicks at the pedals. It is Will's interpretations of good and evil that Daniel wants Will to consider by assessing Hannibal's. Daniel knows Will identifies with Hannibal through his empathy.

Daniel's gentle prompt was designed to cause Will to consider the ways he and Hannibal *see* and that Will has been *seeing* Hannibal's deeds through the lens of his values, not Hannibal's. Will's recent dreams would seem to concur. Hannibal sees himself as a problem solver; problem solving is hunting. Hannibal also seeks to solve other people's problems, and although he ignores the pain his fixing caused for all his patients who required it, Hannibal was trying to help them, to do what he thought best for them.

Our conversations, Will, were only ever about you opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.

What you did to me is in my head, and I will find it. I'm going to remember, Dr. Lecter, and when I do, there will be a reckoning.

I have huge faith in you, Will. I always have.

Will rubs at his face. Conversations aside, Hannibal had injected Will with more than words. Will wonders if the illicit therapy he remembers in bits and pieces has anything to do with Hannibal's huge faith in him. Hannibal honestly believed he was helping Will; that he was doing good. Was it good for Will or for Hannibal? Should Hannibal's therapy prove effective, *and it was effective*, Will corrects himself, what would be the benefit to Hannibal? Altruism was not in Hannibal's vocabulary.

You have to ask yourself what it is he wanted from you…

Daniel continues to be very good at his job. Will has to admit he is very thorough. His understanding of how Will's mind works with all its spiraling associations and imagery combined with Daniel's grasp of Will's relationship with Hannibal has led Will down a path he deliberately throws obstacles onto in order to avoid taking that very path.

Will sits up straight on the piano bench. Perhaps this is why his dreams of the burned out forest keep repeating up to the point where the serpent tailed eagle with the blood red eyes waits beyond the crest of smoldering rock. Will continues to wake up just before he summons the courage to go further.

A brilliant crack of light flashes about Daniel's living room and Will blinks his eyes to the sharp pain in his head that seems to resonate with the bright light that continues to flash. For a moment the piano pedals at his feet and the keys at his fingertips change in the light, morphing into a different piano. A piano of oak not mahogany sits before him; a straight back, not a baby grand, is shoved against faded wall paper of tiny pink rosebuds and pale green leaves. Will breathes the scent of salt air through his nostrils and the room vibrates again, like it had in his suite at Via dei Benci.

Will's chest tightens and he closes his eyes willing the flashes to stop. The tightness in his chest isn't so much about being frightened and Will is frightened by the odd hallucination, but he recognizes the ache of loneliness that rends his soul as he sits rocking on the bench the way the wound in his gut tears at his mind. He feels…alone, again.

Ever feel abandoned, Will?

"Will…Will?"

Will's eyes move beneath heavy lids. He had been sitting at a different piano, in a different room. Not Daniel's house…not his house in Wolf Trap either…but he has seen the room before. Where…

"Will!" Daniel observes Will with marked concern as he sits at the piano his eyes fluttering slits in the sunlight that streams from the patio. He wonders how long Will has been sitting here like this… The dogs pace by the door and Daniel realizes they have to go out, that Will has not taken them outside recently, maybe not all day.

He sits down on the bench and grabs Will by the shoulders, gentle presses to nudge him out of his trance. Will begins to shake himself free from wherever he is.

Will sees mist before his eyes, smells whiffs of ocean air and realizes his eyes are not fully open. Consciousness causes the mist to dissipate and Will sees Daniel's face staring into his, his large green eyes moving all over Will.

"What happened?" Will says, wondering what is causing Daniel to look so worried. He just spaced out for a minute. But Daniel should not be home yet…

"How do you feel?" Daniel asks, his hands still perched on Will's shoulders. The trembling begins to subside…gradually beneath Daniel's fingers.

"Disoriented."

Daniel searches Will's eyes, sees the familiar clouds of hurt and confusion there, feels the anger and frustration from him welling in his own chest. Daniel resists the impulse to break contact, knowing that moving away would also hurt, would at least injure what pride Will has left. Having Daniel find him like this is embarrassing enough.

Will blinks as he looks at the mantle clock.

"It's…is it four thirty, already?"

"Yeah. I closed up early, left at four instead of five. Took about half an hour to get home. Will, when was the last time you looked at the clock?"

"Eleven." Will says his face like stone.

Will looks around the living room and his eyes fix on Bella and Cara pacing by the front door. Will rolls his shoulders and scoots back along the bench, he feels Daniel's hands fall away.

"Ah, I'm sorry. They must really have to go. Go ahead and take them out. I'm ok."

Will stands up and shuffles into the kitchen. He has not changed his clothes from what he wore to bed last night; Will stands over the sink still wearing only boxers and a tee. Daniel watches him take a large glass from the cabinet and turn on the faucet over the sink to let the cold water run.

"I'll be here when you get back. I suppose you'll want to talk…"Will says his attention focused on the water swirling down the drain.

"We can talk if you want, or not. Get your head right first."

Will laughs as he shakes his head and stares into the sink. “That’s what I’m paying you for.”

Daniel ignores the bitterness. He can’t blame Will for his sour humor this afternoon. Apparently, leaving him here alone without something to do, without something to engage his mind besides his thoughts is not a good idea. Daniel hooks the dogs up to their leashes. He will give the matter some thought while he walks them.

Will could not know that Daniel stopped billing Verger over a week ago. Daniel figures the less Verger knows about Will’s therapy the better. And, at this point in their relationship, Daniel cannot bring himself to accept the money. And not just because he finds Mason Verger a repulsive human being.

He does not consider Will his patient any more. Even before the events of this weekend had redefined their relationship, Daniel had been struggling with the patient doctor label. With Will homeless and crashing here for an indefinite period, a reevaluation would seem to be proper.

“I’ll be back soon. Why don’t you start dinner or something? Make yourself useful.”

Daniel catches Will’s eyes as he turns toward the front door. As he opens the door to let the dogs bolt outside he feels relief from the spark of amusement he saw in the dark clouds. Hopefully, the storm will have cleared by the time he gets back.

Chapter End Notes

> As promised, the next chapter is a Hannibal and Du Maurier chapter but... I was unable to finish it fit for posting. I will do my best to post by mid-week. Being out of state put me out of my element and I overestimated what I could accomplish. Hope everyone had a Happy Thanksgiving!

Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

An interesting conversation with Hannibal's cousin Roberta.

"I was deeply saddened when our correspondence stopped; I decided to let you be the one to resume contact." Roberta says after a moment.

"I knew you were taking care of Uncle Roberto. I am aware that our correspondence did not set well with your father. There was always that. He had made no secret that you were off limits."

"He only meant to protect the family, his family, Hannibal. He always loved you, but you forced him to make choices."

"And did daddy dearest ever learn of your proclivities?"

Chapter 37

An interesting conversation with Hannibal's cousin Roberta.

Hannibal sits on the veranda that faces the back of his villa. His sleek black swim trunks are still damp and his thin muslin shirt clings to his moist skin. Water still drips from his hair onto the terry towel that hangs around his neck. He thinks he should just have Gianni dye his hair back to blonde completely rather than contend with the constant nuisance of adjusting for the chlorine. Hannibal tires of the ruddy brown he had settled upon. The brunette locks belong on someone else.

The morning sun strikes the surface of the pool and Hannibal blinks into the glare stubbornly refusing to allow the sun to obstruct his view of his garden or detract from the delight of his flowers.

He is speaking to his cousin Roberta, who had not phoned the other evening and will now inform Hannibal of the reason for her delay, at least he hopes that is her intention for calling this morning. Talking with Roberta has always been easy and pleasant. Because she was not present during his sojourn with her father and Lady Murasake, there are no negative associations or memories of

Roberta. He had corresponded with her years ago after he had arrived in Maryland alone; reduced to his own resourcefulness. She had been a taste of home across the miles.

After he had acclimated himself to university life and could arrange for a third party in France to forward his letters under cover of another name he had struck something close to friendship with his distant cousin. It had quickly become apparent that they were not so distant.

His relationship with his cousin had developed completely independently of Uncle Roberto. A necessary deception thinks Hannibal, and most fruitful. Roberta guards her secrets and her sanctuary as jealously as does Hannibal.

Hannibal is certain this is the reason she has been so cooperative. Hannibal's recent exploits had been splashed all over the news, all over the planet apparently. Hannibal can imagine Roberta was not pleased at having to field questions because she shared his name. But, Hannibal can also imagine her dispensing with all the unwanted attention for as long as it lasted with the same quiet authority as her father, and Hannibal thinks, with something close to his own focused efficiency. His uncle's words had proved prophetic. Hannibal thinks his cousin a more worthy successor to the family legacy than Roberto ever was. At least his own father had embraced the heritage of the name and all that came with it. Had died embracing it.

"So, you are enjoying Florence?" Roberta says in her delightful accent.

Her English is grammatically perfect, but her French is evident, especially when she punctuates her English with French phrases. Hannibal thinks he could listen to her melodic voice all day. And he could since Tatiana has supplied him with an untraceable encrypted phone. He does not know how it works and does not need to. Tatiana knows how it works.

He knows his cousin has also obtained a similarly untraceable phone else they would not be exchanging such sensitive information with each other. She had tried to explain how her number could register on his phone despite the encryption, but Hannibal had been too eager to converse and her words had washed over him as incomprehensible as the babbling of a proverbial brook. The thought that Roberta might actually know how all the technology works wrangles at a corner of his brain.

He swallows a mouthful of anisette biscotti that dissolves tastelessly on his tongue. He chases the residual powder down with a swig of orange juice from the huge snifter that sits on the Murano serving tray. He has not had much of an appetite the last couple days. He attributes his lack of interest to the heat. At least that is what he tells Du Maurier.

Hannibal's fingers caress the Venetian glass glittering on the table, concentric circles of cobalt blue alternating with deep red and dark yellow hues. Plans, within plans, within plans…

"You know you do not have to speak English on my account." Hannibal says his fingers tracing along the circles of the tray.

"Oh, mais oui, Hannibal. I need the practice as I so rarely hear it. Why, I cannot remember the last time I watched a show from the UK or the US."

"What a coincidence, neither can I."

Hannibal enjoys the purr of laughter from her. It has been a while since he has been warmed by soft laughter so thoroughly. Hannibal misses that warmth and the source of it but turns his thoughts to the matters at hand before he imagines soft curls and a stubbly profile on the other side of the curtains that hang to his right.

“Why did you stop writing?” Roberta asks abruptly, causing Hannibal to sit up a little straighter in his burgundy and white chaise lounge. He slips the towel from around his neck and tosses it over the back of the chair. He honestly does not remember why.

“When did I stop?”

“I believe the last letter I received from you was what…at least eight years ago. You had written that you had just left the ER at Maryland General. Why did you leave?”

Roberta falls silent. Hannibal searches his mind for an appropriate response. Roberta need not know every reason he left Maryland General Hospital.

Hannibal had found new hunting grounds. He had reluctantly left Johns Hopkins’ ER before Maryland General for the same reason. It was not prudent to stay too long in one place.

He had completed his psychiatric boards, had obtained his license to practice and had met Du Maurier at a conference. She had persuaded him to practice psychiatry full time. She had been very persuasive back then. He had enjoyed the power over life and death that being a surgeon had afforded him, but Du Maurier’s brand of psychiatry had provoked in him a different kind of power. The power he had wielded in the ER could not compare to the power of psychiatry in all its manifestations and all its possibilities. The opportunity to study the human condition within his own paradigm and to watch his patients bloom under his tutelage had been truly gratifying. Du Maurier had not been without her wisdom or her charms.

Psychiatry was such a versatile tool in all its vast manifestations. In the right hands of course.

He had noticed how alike he and Du Maurier were, how similar their perspectives on a number of topics, and particularly on the treatment of psychological disorders. Hannibal had found Du Maurier receptive to his particular talents and she had been a willing pupil – to a point…

Roberta is awaiting an answer. Hannibal gives her the short version.

“I had begun my practice by then already realizing that the pace of a surgeon’s life was not conducive to my other interests. I had found someone to share my interests, or rather thought I had.” Hannibal pauses, “I suppose I owe you an apology that is long overdue.”

“Not necessary. Long distance relationships are so difficult, even among family.”

“Relationships do not require distance to be difficult.” Hannibal glances at his cold demi-tasse of espresso, at the lemon rind that clings to the saucer because he never dropped it into the tiny cup. Because he had no taste for the beverage once he had made it.

“I suppose you still live alone?’

“Yes, and rather happily so.” Hannibal lies smoothly.

Roberta is quiet a moment. Although she is aware of the news from Baltimore, she has graciously refrained from alluding to it except to ease her concern that Hannibal was indeed safe. Hannibal supposes she will not challenge the abbreviated version he told her despite the fact that Hannibal knows she is as capable as he of reading between the lines. Of intuiting from the cast of characters which ones had likely been…interesting to Hannibal.

“It is a rare soul who finds contentment in a solitary life, Hannibal. Or have you simply stopped looking?”

“I suppose one never stops looking.” After a short pause he adds, “You are alone.”

“Hmmm. Now. But not always. Perhaps the Fates will allow you some measure of happiness once the storm that sent you back across the ocean has dissipated.”

Or perhaps the storm will follow me. “Perhaps…” Hannibal pushes the espresso to the other side of the table.

“I was deeply saddened when our correspondence stopped; I decided to let you be the one to resume contact.” Roberta says after a moment.

“I knew you were taking care of Uncle Roberto. I am aware that our correspondence did not set well with your father. There was always that. He had made no secret that you were off limits.”

“He only meant to protect the family, his family, Hannibal. He always loved you, but you forced him to make choices.”

“And did daddy dearest ever learn of your proclivities?”

“No…although he shared in them regardless. The irony.”

“And Murasake?”

“If Lady Murasake ever knew or suspected, then she condoned with every mouthful. Always enigmatic that woman, perhaps that is why my father loved her so.”

“How is she?”

“Oh, Hannibal. She died two years ago.”

Hannibal is quiet for a long moment. Though they had been separated by years, Hannibal had not thought them so many.

“From what did she die?” Hannibal asks remembering her face in half shadow as she had turned from him those many years ago.

“Heart failure. Cardiomyopathy apparently. No one knew and if she did, she never told anyone.”

“Ah, did she ever return to Kyoto?”

“No. She helped me manage the estates until she could no longer read the ink, until she could no longer see the paint brushes before her eyes.”

“She lost her eyesight?”

“Mon dieu, poor soul that she became. She suffered from macular degeneration, too. Inoperable.”

Hannibal does not want to imagine her beautiful jeweled eyes atrophied. He thinks fleetingly that had he been there he might have detected her conditions, might have saved…

A life without regret would be no life at all.

Hannibal is beginning to see a correlation between his age and the number of regrets. While a perfectly natural state of affairs for mortality, Hannibal finds the thought arresting nonetheless.

“It must have pained her, to give up her art.”

Hannibal remembers her beautiful drawings and the carefully applied brushstrokes upon the pottery she designed and decorated. The Japanese characters had been finely rendered upon the clay and then heated in the kiln in the little room off from the kitchen. Hannibal had helped her remove them, marveling at the fragile glazed bowls and vases.

“As she ached for you.” Roberta says quietly.

Hannibal knows she does not expect him to respond. He has never discussed Murasake with Roberta, but he never had to. Her father had told her all about Hannibal, a cautionary tale for his impetuous and precocious daughter. Lady Murasake had kept Hannibal’s secrets; it was Roberto who had unwittingly piqued his own daughter’s interests and...had whetted her appetites. Both brothers had managed to infect their children. Hannibal thinks Uncle Roberto should have moved a little further away from his brother and family in Soviet controlled Lithuania than France, but Hannibal would likely have found him regardless.

“Well, the reason I called then. These people you seek have long roots. I apologize for not calling the other night. I was awaiting some photographs. I will send them after we are finished speaking. You do want to know what they look like, n’est pas?”

“C’est vrai.” Hannibal agrees. Hannibal cannot imagine the apple falling far from the tree. They undoubtedly look like Matteo, Carlo and the rest of the Paolini family. Very much like the pigs they raise and train.

“They are part of a larger family that spreads all over Sardinia and more recently in Tuscany. The family includes the Paolini and a couple of other families, all related through marriage. They are a sort of consortium for hire; services go to the highest bidder. They are very dangerous, Hannibal.”

“Because they can be bought?”

“Because once bought, they are fiercely loyal. They are ruthless. This couple is brother and sister from a branch of the family with US contacts.”

“Are they a couple or brother and sister?’

“Well, both actually.”

“Interesting. And where are they now?”

“They are still in Saint Laurent.”

“What are they doing there, and perhaps more importantly, how did they know to look there?”

"They must have found something on my father when he lived in Prague for a time, before we moved to Paris. They have yet to approach me or anyone I know personally. They are circumspect and prefer to hire temporary assistance. I imagine the temporary assistance disappears. No way to trace inquiries or side jobs back to them."

"Very neat." Hannibal says as he rubs the soft cloth over his chest. Despite sitting beneath the shelter of the veranda, the Tuscan sun burns ever brightly and the air is heavy with moisture already despite the early hour. Hannibal knows his next question will arouse his cousin's curiosity and her ire.

"Do we know who they are working for?"

"No…who would they be working for, Hannibal?" She asks in an even tone.

Hannibal smiles and raises his brow. Roberta is refreshingly direct. He has become too used to Du Maurier's oblique and meandering metaphors.

I need to know if this is a vendetta."

"A vendetta. Hannibal, what have you done? Rather, what else have you done?"

"I did what was necessary to protect myself."

"Who were they? I would need to know the names of any family you dishonored…in self-defense."

"Of course. Same last name. A Carlo and a Matteo. I gathered that Matteo was a family favorite. Besides needing to know if the family seeks to avenge the cousins, I also need to know if the family has been compensated or further engaged by a Mason Verger."

"The meat packing Vergers?"

"The very same."

"My, my, you certainly do move within rarefied social circles."

"You have no idea." Hannibal smiles into the phone.

"You wouldn't have anything to do with Mr. Verger's recent and tragic accident, would you?"

"I was his psychiatrist." Hannibal offers.

"I see. Well then. I assume you wish for me to continue my surveillance of the twins?"

"Twins as well. Most intriguing. Please do continue if you have no objections?"

"None."

"And do let me know when they return to the vicinity."

"You intend to confront them?"

"I should like to invite them to dinner."

“Ah, then may I recommend a 2009 Agricola Punica? It’s from Sardinia. A delightful red blend, almost violet in color and very soft and elegant on the palate. I last paired it with…lamb.”

“Duly noted.”

“And Hannibal, your invitation may very likely provoke an invitation in kind.”

“I believe an invitation is forthcoming regardless.”

“I will send you the photos then. Au revoir, Hannibal.”

“Thank you, Roberta.” Hannibal clicks off his phone and squints at the yard while he waits for the photo file. His vegetable garden was well tended yesterday. Today, he can focus his attentions on the flowers, especially the roses. Hannibal thinks he will cut a half dozen for the dinner table tonight.

Du Maurier should be driving back to Siena about now. She will freshen up; perhaps take a dip in her hot tub, before driving to Impruneta. He wonders what sort of outfit dear Doctor Du Maurier will show up in this evening. Hannibal decides on the blood red roses for the table.

Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Hannibal has his dinner with Bedelia. The vipers circle and seek a truce. Or do they?

Hannibal feels a quiet anger threading through his limbs. Thoughts meander around his mind the way his eyes linger over Du Maurier's petite form as she sits across from him. She appears to be enjoying the wine and the music but Hannibal knows her thoughts are as deep as his. And perhaps, just as dark.

He had told Du Maurier that he would handle Will.

Chapter 38

Hannibal has his dinner with Bedelia. The vipers circle and seek a truce. Or do they?

Du Maurier walks in front of Hannibal as he ushers her into his palatial and predictably aquamarine dining room at the back of the villa. Large unadorned windows are a must for Hannibal so he can always see his reflection and the reflections of his guests. The curtains will of course be drawn once again when celebrations have ceased. She can see the veranda through the entrance way, the panes of Venetian cut glass, elegant enough to rival any found in a church, open to the shimmer of the swimming pool Hannibal cannot do without.

She recognizes the violin concerto playing - *Summer*, from Vivaldi's Four Seasons. Not her favorite Vivaldi piece, but appropriate. The Baroque period seems to have overtaken Hannibal. She is surprised he has not replaced his harpsichord. Curious that…she understood him to play and compose on the one in Baltimore frequently.

She wears a chic Versace dress with her usual calculated perfection. The design plunges low in both front and back and the sensuous silk is the most alluring shade of red. Du Maurier knows the red of the dress will cast a subtle pink glow along the pale skin of her limbs and bosom in the soft lights Hannibal places around the dining room table.

She glides into the room and takes her seat, turning her head to the side to acknowledge Hannibal's graciously offered adjustment of her chair. He lingers at her side, face upturned to meet hers as he slides her chair closer to the table. As she turns her head to gaze upon the table setting her eyes alight upon the bouquet of fresh cut roses. The smile fades from her lips before she can catch herself. The roses, so freshly cut that moisture clings to the petals, are nearly the same shade as her dress. She manages to keep her mouth closed and jaw slack.

How does he do that? She reminds herself it is game of probability. He really had no way of knowing what she would wear; he only wants her to think that. Doesn't he?

Hannibal pauses a moment longer and lets a satisfied smile spread across his face. Du Maurier lifts her head and her smile reappears.

"Lovely roses, Hannibal. Yours?' Du Maurier shakes out her napkin and watches Hannibal take his seat across from her. He opens the wine as he speaks.

"Yes. Hybrid Tea. The first successful cross between hybrid perpetual and tea varieties was in 1867. The first modern rose if you will; a departure from the Old Garden varieties. These are a variation on that first flower."

Du Maurier picks up her glass to meet the bottle of Sauvignon Hannibal holds out to her.

"Well, to an evening of firsts."

Hannibal raises his brows, a gesture of surprise, his face a mask of amusement. "Now *that* would be a refreshing change, would it not?" He lifts his glass to hers. "To an evening of firsts, then."

And all its consequences.

Du Maurier feels the urge to gulp down the entire glass. That would be a first, too.

The meal of lightly spiced lemon risotto and foie gras served with an assortment of delicious cheeses and thick slices of summer sausage is undeniably superb as expected. Everything is perfectly seasoned and calibrated to compliment the equally spicy wine choice. Conversation ambles aimlessly as Hannibal finds topic after topic to dissect while Du Maurier drinks glass after glass of wine. Eventually, plates are empty and stomachs are full. Hannibal fills the wine glasses yet again.

Du Maurier takes the glass from Hannibal's hands and offers a smile and nod. He should know by now that despite her diminutive frame, she can imbibe her fair share of alcohol. In fact, she would wager she can hold her own as well as Hannibal. She has been drinking far longer than he has. If only Hannibal's guests in Baltimore had known how many of the selections served at his banquets and dinner parties had been hers.

Hannibal had proven to be a quick study. It had not been long before Du Maurier found herself out of the loop. Having been perturbed by her absence at his table, he had found he could get along quite well without her wine suggestions, too. Du Maurier is aware Hannibal has outgrown her in many respects and if she does not take the initiative to remedy the account situation, Hannibal will. That would be unacceptable.

She sits sipping the piquant Sauvignon from the Alto Adige region. She detects the tang of citrus and the earthiness of stone. Hannibal is always so very adept at pairing wines with entrees. She sniffs the bouquet once again thinking what an exquisite palate he has.

She reminds herself he also has an appetite for forbidden fruit, fruit that hangs so high on the tree that he stumbles up the ladder trying to reach it. It is a good thing she is here, she decides. Perhaps she can persuade Hannibal to show his hand, or at the very least she can offer him insight, if he will let her, like he used to. Du Maurier would very much like a return to things as they used to be.

But not if her association with Hannibal remains a pale imitation of what it once was. Not if she is to be resigned to an existence of waiting for the day Hannibal is eventually reunited with Graham. And a reunion will happen. It will happen because Hannibal wills it so. Du Maurier knows this is an eventuality, she has been with Hannibal long enough to know Hannibal and Fate enjoy a very comfortable relationship. But, it will happen when Du Maurier decides it will happen.

Du Maurier has decided that what Hannibal needs is to vent the pent up desires and frustrations that color everything he does. He needs something, or someone, to ignite his curiosity so that he falls into his familiar pattern of checking his impulses against hers, of sharing in the fabrication of a psychological mousetrap they can build together and then take apart. And in building their mousetrap, they can repair their fractured relationship to the degree that he is sufficiently placated.

Whatever his hopes or plans regarding Graham, Hannibal must be persuaded to show his intentions however concealed within conceit they might be. Du Maurier wants to leave this evening or perhaps tomorrow morning with some kind of accord between them.

She has a proposal for him this evening, and despite his penchant for trying to disarm her as he had done earlier with the roses, she is confident he will be intrigued with the new pawn she intends to introduce on the board.

If Hannibal insists on pursuing Graham, he leaves Du Maurier with no choice but to free herself of him once and for all. She cannot and will not live in Graham's shadow for the rest of her life. If she does manage to get the code and close out the account, Hannibal will come after her. She has no choice but to tie up loose ends.

Hannibal clearly wants his reunion with Graham. It is just as clear that he intends to finish whatever it was he started with him. Du Maurier doubts that includes another blade. Graham could not possibly forgive Hannibal. Hannibal's conceit will not allow him to admit he made a mistake. A very human mistake.

And because Hannibal seems to believe there exists even the remote possibility that Graham's near death experience at his hands did not fill Graham to the brim with revenge Du Maurier must manufacture a situation that refills that cup.

How satisfying and liberating it would be to dispense with both of them. And dear Doctor Clayton will provide the keystone in her own *Arc de Triomphe*.

Hannibal sits opposite Du Maurier also sipping at the lovely Sauvignon. Thoughts roll swiftly through his mind, a tide of possibilities for her behaviors and the resulting consequences of each. There are always consequences. The art of anticipating the most probable outcome lies in correctly accounting for the intended consequences and considering the unintended consequences.

And, unlike his precious Will, Du Maurier remains predictable. She wears her predictability like an old glove, familiar and comfortable. Hannibal thinks the viper might bite should he use a stick this evening. Hannibal will decide when she bites, and she will believe it is the only choice she has.

Like rudeness, jealousy is an ugly thing and apparently quite the motivator for Du Maurier. Hannibal had not realized Du Maurier's caution regarding Will had been rooted in such a pettiness although, in hindsight he should have. Hannibal had not considered jealousy until she had come to his office to inform him of her dismissal of him as her remaining patient. Understandable now, she had acted out of survival choosing to cut off her association with him; removing herself from the destructive radius should Hannibal continue his courting of Will. But it was her tart response upon hearing from Hannibal that he had resumed his therapy with Will on her way out his door that jealousy raised its ugly head.

I'm resuming Will Graham's therapy.

To what end? Besides your own.

He asked for my help.

Then maybe you deserve each other.

Her words had all the warmth of a frozen pond, and her eyes had held Hannibal's in a steely gaze. As if Hannibal had been the prey, undeserving of even her contempt. Hannibal supposes she had seen something of Will's budding potential beneath the veiled nuances exchanged between them as he had sat in her living room. She had seen Icarus and wanted no part of his fall.

Suspecting she would flee with the bank code was not the only reason Hannibal had donned his plastic suit. Suspecting that she might harm his precious protégé to protect her own secrets had also prompted Hannibal to drive to her house only to find it emptied of her save her perfume. She had set her game with the FBI in motion, in the hope that Hannibal would clean house before she had to implement it, leaving him her little message in a bottle.

She had known he would want the bank code. She had known he would come to her house for it. She had also known that he would not follow her, could not follow her because she had also known he would not leave Will. She had been correct about many things.

Hannibal wonders how long she had planned on leaving before she had arranged her own meeting with Will at BSHCI, how long before she had confronted him in his office. Hannibal had not known she had paid Will a visit when he had driven out to her home. Unbelievably, Du Maurier has yet to tell him of her visit herself. Had Will not mentioned it; he would still not know. She must suspect that Will had mentioned it at some point. Hannibal has to assume that she does not care.

She has since evidently come to view Will as an adversary worthy of her manipulations. Since Will had sent someone to kill him. Since Will had managed to enter Hannibal's inner sanctum. Since he had survived Hannibal. Since Hannibal had allowed him the choice to survive.

Hannibal wonders if she would dare attempt to remove him now should their paths ever cross. She has to know that to even touch him would cause Hannibal to dispatch her without a second thought.

Will belongs to him.

Before her fateful decision to involve herself in Hannibal's plans for Will, her sessions with Hannibal had reiterated over and over that Hannibal was walking into a trap of his own design. Will had still been at the Baltimore State Hospital when she had calmly reminded Hannibal, as though the thought had not already occurred to him, that by refusing to speak to Chilton and requesting Hannibal instead, Will had signaled his clear intent to manipulate Hannibal and by acquiescing to Will's invitation to continue a dialogue, Hannibal had signaled his clear intent to manipulate Will.

Hannibal had not disagreed but neither had he acceded to her observation. If she had harbored concerns about the nature of his relationship with Will, that particular observation and her articulation of it had carved out Du Maurier's concerns in high relief.

Hannibal could imagine Du Maurier reaching for a pint of Häagen Dazs after his session with her that day.

Will's release from BSHCI must have resulted in another pint and a large box of chocolates as well.

Still, she had chipped away at Jack, impressing upon him that he was being outmaneuvered, that Hannibal was in complete control when, in fact, she had been talking about herself the entire time. She had been confident that Hannibal would assume control of the situation.

She had also spoken to Will prior to speaking with Jack. Hannibal can only imagine that conversation since prodding Du Maurier about it would serve no constructive purpose.

Hannibal can imagine Will's inner conflict brewing inside as he had questioned Du Maurier with Uncle Jack behind the glass, and Du Maurier playing to Will's doubts with practiced compassion while delivering poisoned thorns designed to prickle and fester in the recesses of Will's mind. Hannibal will likely never know what actual words were exchanged between them, but knowing Du Maurier, everything she had said would have caused Will to question even the most unguarded and honest moments he and Hannibal had shared. She would have painted herself with a victim's brush most convincingly. Will had already known he wasn't the first to be subjected to Hannibal's persuasive therapy.

She had taken her own doubts about her place with Hannibal and had deftly deposited them in Will, a remarkable example of transference that should ordinarily not have any effect on the other person, except for Will whose empathy had no doubt interpreted her well placed thorns and had internalized the message that he and Du Maurier were merely curiosities for Hannibal in a long line of curiosities. Perhaps he had even recognized that she was his immediate predecessor.

Hannibal realizes now that he had never impressed upon Will enough how special he was to him. As unique as each patient was, Will had been singularly unique. Du Maurier had known that, had felt threatened by that, feels threatened still, but Hannibal thinks Will had not. Will's personality, his own lack of self-importance would have precluded the idea. Du Maurier's version of Hannibal would have been much easier to believe. Will could not have known Du Maurier's past with Hannibal and so, his imagination had created the version Du Maurier had constructed for him.

Hannibal can only hope that Will reevaluate his conversations with Du Maurier, that he reexamine her motives. He might be able to see her, as he had been able to see Hannibal. Hannibal would enjoy trying to posit Will's intentions then. There is another question that Hannibal hopes Will reexamines.

Did Will know that Hannibal had loved him? Truly loved him? Can Will even fathom what that means?

Does Will know that in watching him struggle against his impulses Hannibal had understood that resistance? That watching Will grow and evolve had caused Hannibal to feel pride in another – an emotion Hannibal was used to attributing only to himself. Hannibal thinks in that awful final embrace of blood and tears, Will might have understood many things even if his mind had not been equipped to process that understanding at the time. Will had felt his pain. Did he understand that no one had ever caused Hannibal such pain?

Hannibal hopes that by now, he might have finally wrapped his beautiful mind around certain realities. The universe they had created was sustainable; it was not limited by geography. The potential Hannibal had seen in him was god like in its majesty. Everything Hannibal had done for Will, and to Will, was to help him stop repressing who he was meant to be.

And for these realities, Hannibal had found him worthy of his friendship. But, Will had refused his gift. The potential of becoming a worthy adversary is also there. If Du Maurier had her druthers, Will would be knocking down his door right now to wring his hands around Hannibal's neck. And Du Maurier would not lift a finger to stop him. Except to try and extract the bank code while his trachea was being crushed.

Refusing is not the same thing as throwing away. Would Will refuse his gift of friendship again, if given the chance? Hannibal wants that chance.

Hannibal has never loved another being as completely as he has loved Will. He is haunted by the realization that he never truly knew if what he had seen was actually Will or a very convincing mask. The fact that he may never know rubs like sandpaper.

Hannibal feels a quiet anger threading through his limbs. Thoughts meander around his mind the way his eyes linger over Du Maurier's petite form as she sits across from him. She appears to be enjoying the wine and the music but Hannibal knows her thoughts are as deep as his. And perhaps, just as dark.

He had told Du Maurier that he would handle Will.

You have to maintain boundaries, Hannibal.

When the pressures of my personal and professional relationship with Will grow too great, I assure you I will find a way to relieve them.

And he had relieved those pressures, just not to her liking. Life was full of disappointments. And regrets.

Du Maurier is not to be trifled with, that much is certain. Her desire for his bank code is so excruciatingly transparent that Hannibal has begun to wonder if that in itself is not some grand deception on her part. However, her awareness makes her vulnerable. Hannibal need only meet expectations and then direct her gaze toward those expectations and keep it there. This evening's discussion should provide Hannibal with the requisite direction.

"We should listen to the music outside. I would prefer to finish the wine before I tackle the dishes." Hannibal says, rising from his seat.

"Of course." Du Maurier feels his hand upon the small of her back he guides her out to the veranda. She takes up a seat adjacent to him so she can set her glass down on the glass table between them. The dimly lit yard smells of fresh cut grass and chlorine.

Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal and Bedelia resume their conversation on the veranda. A very Nietzschean conversation.
>
> “Hannibal. Why did you ask me to authorize a transfer of assets only to leave them where they are?”
>
> “Are you so eager to lose the interest? I told you why.”
>
> Du Maurier leans closer and looks into Hannibal’s face. It is unreadable of course, but in doing so, she conveys her impatience at his avoidance.
>
> “You told me a possible truth. Granted we do not easily trust each other and it is for this reason that we created the joint account. However, honesty in this regard is necessary if we are to continue the arrangement we have honored so far. If we are to resume the relationship we once shared. Do we intend to resume our relationship, Hannibal?”
>
> “Is that what we are doing?”

Chapter 39

Hannibal and Bedelia resume their conversation on the veranda. A very Nietzschean conversation.

Hannibal leans back against his chair, allowing his meal and his thoughts to settle before engaging Du Maurier. He kicks off his shoes and thinks how Du Maurier will sit there, the thought to remove her own never occurring to her.

“I am aware that you have been checking up on our finances. You have phoned nearly every day. Too bad our account is not online. Any particular reason or just a general sense of impatience?”

Hannibal allows the corners of his mouth to curl up. He conjures something like affection to smooth the cold creases that would grace his face.

“I believe that you should not be surprised that I check on anything regarding Will Graham.”

“What is it that concerns you this time?”

Hannibal is prepared to be honest with Du Maurier. The best traps are laid with it.

This always goes better if I'm perfectly honest with you.

What would be the point otherwise?

Well, one of us has to be honest.

I'm honest.

Not perfectly.

As honest as anyone.

Not really.

Du Maurier is prepared to be bombarded with vagaries that disguise the truth. Hannibal is a master of disguise and actually believes he is being truthful.

“Which version of you am I seeing this evening?” She asks.

“Are you asking as my psychiatrist or my colleague?”

“Neither. Since you seem unable to define our relationship I will. I am asking as your partner. As the significant other who has been very patient regarding your recuperation.”

“My recuperation.” Hannibal stares at Du Maurier across the glass table. Her blue eyes glimmer with the soft candlelight that catches the diamonds of her earrings as she tucks a lock of silken gold behind an ear.

You've helped me to better understand what I want in a friendship, and what I don't.

“Yes, Hannibal. As you have counseled so many others through trauma and loss, you have now experienced both yourself. You grieve. And in grief we are capable of irrational thoughts and actions. I have made no secret of my concerns regarding Graham or our joint account. I think in your grief you have made an error in judgment by linking them together.”

Hannibal is quiet. She has been uncharacteristically candid. Hannibal does not think her above manipulation, but from her point of view, her sentiments are valid.

“Is that what you think I am doing? Making a mistake?”

“Let us be perfectly clear with one another about this since I believe our future together hinges upon it. I think you mean to use this gift as a ruse to locate Graham, either through a legal paper trail or through illegal channels opened by this measure. Further, I also believe that you already know he will never accept your grandiose gesture.”

“Then why would I go through the trouble of presenting him with such a gift?”

“To communicate by the action. He would know the difficulty of arranging the gift, would be surprised by the generosity of it, and might be persuaded to finally contact you. That is what you hope will happen, isn’t it? You tire of waiting for him and…I tire of watching you wait.”

“Please, go on.” Hannibal looks out over the swimming pool, allowing Du Maurier to spill her game plan as she attempts to convince him of the plan she wants him to see. He listens carefully so he can decide which aspects he will use to fulfill her expectations.

“If you insist. You wish to communicate that you value him still. You once compared him to an oil spill. Do you wish to contain it again? You have not moved on Hannibal. You are in fact, more entrenched than ever in your obsession. Why would you attempt to deceive me?”

“I had no idea I was so transparent.” Hannibal continues to look calmly out over the lights that shine upon the still water of the pool. Du Maurier uncrosses her legs, only to cross them again, the other way as she shifts in her seat. Hannibal imagines she must be weary of that tight dress by now.

“Graham has caused your person suit to come apart at the seams. You need not be concerned on my account. I am used to seeing versions of you although I prefer some versions over others.”

Hannibal concedes that she has seen more versions of him than he has seen of her. Du Maurier really has but one version of herself. But, it is a version that has evolved over time. She too has seams unraveling here and there. Seams that Hannibal has targeted since she decided to interfere with Will. There are always consequences.

“The stitching in your suit may continue to unravel under close scrutiny. Naturally, its construction and its maintenance are of particular importance to me.”

“I am aware of your priorities. Despite your romantic overtures, your preoccupation with our joint assets has been abundantly clear for some time. One might call it an obsession.”

Hannibal continues to sip at his wine although it has begun to taste acidic. Perhaps the heat has spoiled it; the glass is as warm as the backyard. He puckers his lips as he considers the tannins.

Du Maurier observes Hannibal’s disenchantment with the wine. She must seize the opportunity to clear the air about Graham and the account before she can present her proposition to Hannibal, before he becomes equally disenchanted with her.

“It would seem one of us must protect our assets when the other is incapable, or incapacitated.”

“Protect? Have I given you cause for concern?”

“Hannibal. Why did you ask me to authorize a transfer of assets only to leave them where they are?”

“Are you so eager to lose the interest? I told you why.”

Du Maurier leans closer and looks into Hannibal’s face. It is unreadable of course, but in doing so, she conveys her impatience at his avoidance.

“You told me a possible truth. Granted we do not easily trust each other and it is for this reason that we created the joint account. However, honesty in this regard is necessary if we are to continue the arrangement we have honored so far. If we are to resume the relationship we once shared. Do we intend to resume our relationship, Hannibal?”

“Is that what we are doing?”

Du Maurier reaches her hand across the expanse between them and curls her slim fingers around Hannibal’s larger fingers as they grip the arms of the chair.

“It is what I what I thought we were doing, would like to be doing. And you?” She looks up at him and Hannibal is struck with how beautiful she is. How convincing she is.

He takes her hand in his and leans to press his lips to her wrist. “I think “yes” is the answer to that.” Hannibal draws away and Du Maurier sits back in her chair, satisfied.

“Then, candor from you would be appreciated. Why the delay? You can appreciate that any transaction connected to Will Graham would give me pause in light of what happened. I understand that there would be difficulty arranging your…gift.”

“We have discussed this already…there were unforeseen complications that go beyond legal difficulty.”

“Because the FBI has flagged not only your transactions but Graham’s as well. Even if you can manage secrecy on your end, Graham’s modest assets would not bear scrutiny.”

“They want me to contact him so that he will lead them to me. And, I am not entirely sure that he would be unhappy about that.”

“At least we agree on something. Then may I suggest transferring the assets and deeds to the Cayman’s or to the attorneys to hold in escrow until the arrangements can be safely concluded.”

“I am always open to suggestion and to negotiation.”

Du Maurier presses into the back of her chair. She sets the tepid wine on the table. “What are we negotiating, Hannibal?”

“What did you say to Will when you visited him at BSHCI?”

“Ah, when did he tell you? You’ve had a long time to fixate on a singular occurrence.”

“I was waiting for you to tell me. Now, what did you say to him?”

“That he could survive what was happening to him. That I believed him. What he inferred from that, I cannot say.”

“I think we can both guess. What did you imagine he would infer?”

Du Maurier draws a deep breath before continuing. “He likely inferred that he was not the only person you had ever tried to persuade. And I do not doubt that coming from me, those words carried significant weight.”

“Why visit him? Why say anything at all?”

Du Maurier is gratified with the tremor of tenderness that catches in Hannibal’s tone. The wound Graham inflicted remains…raw.

“I was protecting my assets. And yours. He was in a very dark place. I darkened it even more. I hoped he would be provoked to move against you so that you would have to end him. And he did. But you did not end him. And here we are, again.”

Hannibal meets her gaze and she does not waver. Hannibal knows he cannot blame Will’s actions on Du Maurier’s interference, as significant as it was. There were many factors, all acting in concert. She is being truthful though without admitting to the jealousy, but Hannibal does not expect her to acknowledge that.

“Hannibal, I only did what I thought was the best for us. As you did what you thought was best for Will Graham.”

Hannibal blinks but says nothing. Du Maurier can see she has struck the nerve again. Not surprising. The nerves connected to Graham's wound are so close to the surface.

"If he is as perceptive as you think he is, and he returned to resume therapy with you, then he was aware of your desires, and being aware, he manipulated you using your own desires against you. Your awareness of his awareness caused you to become overconfident. Surely you can see this now?"

Hannibal marvels at Du Maurier's compulsion to reveal herself. He decides to reward her with more honesty.

"I knew he was working with Jack Crawford. It was the only way he could resume our sessions with some measure of control. He manipulated Jack to turn the other way so he could…follow his instincts."

"His instincts were to betray you. You let him climb your walls Hannibal and you let him get too close. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, our patients do not want what is best for them. Graham prefers his universe to yours."

"I was honest with Will."

"Were you honest with him? Which version of you did you let him see? Your person suit has many layers it would seem. Did you strip all of the layers away for him?"

"What a colorful metaphor."

"Perhaps you stripped away too much for someone with his unique sensibilities. You would never acknowledge the part of him that clung to his values and his sense of righteousness despite what you did to him, what you took from him."

You've helped me to better understand what I want in a friendship, and what I don't.

Someone worthy of your friendship.

Hannibal does not tell her that Will's tenacity, his ability to retain his sense of self throughout the gauntlet that Hannibal sent him through had signaled to Hannibal that he did possess the potential to become a worthy companion. A strong primal force equal to his own. Will was light to his darkness; morning to his night. And Du Maurier would have him settle for afternoons soaked in wine hazed bliss upon satin sheets…

"From what I could discern in our brief conversations, Will Graham was definitely responsive to your therapy. But instead of awakening a kindred spirit, you created a monster who seeks only to destroy its creator. Nothing I said, or could have said, would have changed that."

"It would appear I have you to thank for saving me from myself after all. You of all people know how…much I regret having to leave Baltimore as I did." Hannibal says without even a drop of sarcasm. He listens to her bait her own trap.

Du Maurier nods her head. Whether or not he actually believes what he just said does not matter. He is prepared to play.

"Sometimes all we can do is watch, Hannibal. I watched. I watched as much as I could and then I left because I could not bear to watch anymore."

But not before you interfered in what was mine. "What would you like to happen now?" Hannibal says simply.

"Between us? Or to Graham? I could ask you the same question."

"Both questions are salient, yes? He will always be in the room with us. I think the better question is what are you prepared to accept in order to resume our relationship and preserve our… arrangement."

"How would you characterize your relationship with him at this point? I believe I deserve an honest answer to that."

"Bedelia…" Hannibal pauses, looks away from the sapphire eyes that widen at the use of her given name. A gift of firsts, for her. "Estranged." Hannibal says quietly.

"And do you see that changing in the future?" Du Maurier's tone is softer now. Of course it is.

"No. Not really. But you do understand why I continue to try."

"Your concern for him is admirable, but you do understand he requires distance to work through his feelings and his guilt. From what I know of him, he carries an enormous amount of guilt."

"And fear. You do understand, don't you?"

"I understand that sometimes we want something so much, we do not recognize that we create the thing we seek when in reality we chase only dreams. If you must exhaust every avenue to find your truth, then do so. But, you seem to forget that I am the one who came with you, who is here with you now; not Graham."

Hannibal is well aware that it is Du Maurier and not Will sitting beside him at the moment. The awareness has become such a constant dull ache that Hannibal does not remember when he did not feel this way. Hannibal knows that Du Maurier sits there because of a bank account and he knows if it were Will sitting there, that bank account would mean nothing. Still, this is the hinge he has been hoping for. He can now open the door onto Du Maurier's board and proceed to take the queen for all she is worth.

"Tell me, what is it you want with regard to the account at Banque Suisse?"

"I'd like for you to either make your withdrawal and be done with it, or forget the matter entirely so that it becomes what it should always be, a non-issue."

Hannibal does not doubt Du Maurier much prefers the former and would be taken aback if Hannibal suddenly agreed to drop the matter; however, he does want to *appear* as though he intends to withdraw the assets for Will. Otherwise, he will have to wait for another opportunity to properly thank her for her trouble.

"Bedelia, now that I am cognizant of your concerns, I cannot in good conscience move anything until I am satisfied that the transaction is secure. I do not wish to jeopardize our assets either. The

FBI is most thorough and I do not pretend to be an expert in these matters. But my attorneys do know experts."

"And when will these experts be in a position to act on your behalf?"

"I imagine within a few weeks, perhaps a month. Why?"

"Then, during that time, I would like to share something, rather someone with you. Like we used to." Du Maurier smiles over her glass.

Hannibal allows a look of surprise to grace his features. "This is proving to be an evening of firsts. First, you surprise me with your honesty regarding Will and now you present me with an intriguing opportunity."

"We both deserve a little diversion. I have to admit that I have had my reservations about proposing this joint venture."

"Reservations regarding what?"

"Regarding the therapeutic efficacy of it. But, after our discussion this evening, I think that this venture would be good for you."

"I'm not following you. To which part of our conversation are you referring?"

"The part about Will Graham. We are agreed that he will never accept anything from you and that his own guilt would prevent him from doing so?"

Hannibal nods.

"You make your gesture to send a message. You want to believe that he will appreciate the difficulty in arranging it and you hope that his heart will be softened?"

"Something like that. Intrigued enough to investigate." Hannibal says.

"The goose never forgave the swan, Hannibal. And Achilles lost his Patroclus."

Du Maurier is well acquainted with the universe Hannibal lives in. He has left enough of his drawings around to fairly advertise it. He exists in a universe of epic proportions, where everyone plays a role in the epic production and everything Hannibal touches is imbued with grand significance. None more so than Graham. He is the hero of his own Odyssey. He will understand her proposition better if she frames her intentions in terms that appeal to his…whimsy.

Hannibal is enjoying Du Maurier's game more with every minute that passes. Rather than try and seduce Hannibal out of his universe as she usually does, she has joined him in it. An evening of firsts, indeed. She must be very confident to leave her comfort zone. Or desperate. All the better.

"Is that how you see him? He is the goose to my swan?"

Du Maurier raises her brows as she stares into Hannibal's face. "Isn't he? Achilles was brought down by hubris, an arrow from Paris' bow. His weakness was revealed to the Trojans."

"Paris avenged Hector. As Achilles avenged Patroclus upon Hector."

“Regardless, Troy still fell. Fell to another act of hubris. They accepted the gift from the Greeks.”

“The Trojan horse. And Greece won.”

“At what cost, Hannibal? Hubris invariably invites the wrath of the gods.” Du Maurier taunts.

“I suppose it depends on which gods and knowing what they are capable of.” Hannibal responds.

Jack Crawford doesn't know what you're capable of.

Neither do you.

“You would be the goose to my swan I suppose.” Hannibal says when Du Maurier demurs with a sip of wine.

“I would be a swan, Hannibal. Like you.” She licks a droplet of wine from her lips, sits the now empty glass on the table.

“The swan spends much time in Fiesole. If your patient there requires so much of your time, she must be quite the topic of conversation in psychiatric circles. Is she this opportunity you speak of?”

“She is quite the topic of conversation, but the psychiatric circle is quite small. I have engaged the services of another psychiatrist to help with her therapy. He is an intriguing young man who presents an unusual opportunity for study.”

“I still don’t understand. I am no longer a practicing psychiatrist. If we are to influence your intriguing young man, in what capacity would I engage him?”

“You have grief issues. Engage him as his patient.” Du Maurier smiles at the stunned look on Hannibal’s face. *Check*, she thinks.

Hannibal has to admit that Du Maurier has outdone herself. This is becoming a most enjoyable game.

“And what would be so compelling about his therapy?” Hannibal asks.

“Since my therapy has reached the limit if its efficacy, you might benefit from some alternative therapy. His therapy involves pairing his human patients with canines. He has written extensively on the empathic possibilities that the human and canine bond offer.”

“Intriguing, but I have no desire to buy a dog.”

“You will. When people lose their dog, what do they usually do?”

“They replace it with a puppy. You are equating my loss of Will with the death of a dog? And this psychiatrist is the puppy?”

“Yes. Because the puppy looks just like him.”

Du Maurier fairly flushes in the wake of Hannibal’s impromptu smile. The glow from the lantern reflects in his dark eyes as he gazes at her and it feels like old times. She knows she will be spending the night.

Hannibal rises from his chair. He holds out his hand to Du Maurier who reaches up to take it. As he grasps her delicate fingers he feels the sense of power that has been so absent of late. He has guided her in leading him exactly where he wanted to be. Hannibal's future has brightened considerably.

Not so for the unsuspecting psychiatrist. It would appear Doctor Clayton is to be a part of the game Du Maurier wants to play after all. His bad luck to favor Will and cross Du Maurier's path. Hannibal's universe moves in mysterious ways.

Hannibal leads Du Maurier inside past the remnants of their evening repast into his sitting room. He gestures toward the splendid sofa and retrieves two snifters and a bottle of Italian Grappa, a Sangiovese variety.

"I think our new venture deserves a toast." Hannibal says warmly, as he pours a healthy amount of the clear liquid. Italians traditionally serve grappa as a chaser to espresso, but Hannibal prefers Du Maurier remain unstimulated.

Du Maurier can only smile. What an enigma Hannibal is. She had not dared hope her proposal would be met with such enthusiasm. Of course Hannibal would be charmed at the prospect of meeting Graham's mirror image. She has at last found a muse for his whimsy.

And Doctor Clayton will manage Hannibal well enough. Knowing how protective he is of his patients, he will never discuss Graham with Hannibal. She doubts Clayton discusses his patients with Graham. Clayton will never have Hannibal to his home, and because Graham now resides with Clayton, Hannibal will never see Graham in Clayton's office either. Any meetings between Clayton and Hannibal will be discreet and far from Graham.

Du Maurier sniffs at the fragrant brandy. It feels good to be in control. She smiles at Hannibal across the lip of her snifter. He smiles back and begins to unbutton his shirt.

Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Recent events cause Will to question his therapy and his therapist. Daniel tries to address Will's concerns, but he's only human, after all.

Will pulls another chair up to the desk and looks at the laptop. The internet is up now. He could check his email when Daniel is done doing whatever he is doing. Will sees Daniel has left his email open. Will glances at Daniel rolling around on the floor with the dogs. He hesitates and then peers into the screen to scan Daniel's email. His eyes scroll quickly over names he does not recognize until he sees one he does.

Will is stunned. Daniel received an out of office email from Frederick Chilton. Will stares at the email. Daniel received it earlier today…

Chapter 40

Recent events cause Will to question his therapy and his therapist. Daniel tries to address Will's concerns, but he's only human, after all.

Will walks down the stairs in Daniel's house quietly his feet still damp and leaving imprints upon the hardwood. He feels refreshed after his shower and change of clothes, especially after apparently sitting around all day in what he had slept in the night before. He is concerned about the loss of time he experienced this afternoon. He remembers his thoughts up to a point, but he can't recall what he had been thinking about for nearly four and a half hours. He could say he was obsessively concerned about it.

He knows he drove from Grafton, West Virginia back to Baltimore without having any memory of the drive at all. He had shown up at Hannibal's office completely at a loss as to how he had gotten there. One minute he had been on a beach staring at a totem of bodies and the next, he had been freaking out to Hannibal.

He had been sick with encephalitis. Hannibal had combined his *therapy* with the effects of his illness to cause the lost time. That was then. But here, now, there is no illness and no unorthodox therapy. Well, not Hannibal's unorthodox therapy. At least as far as he knows.

Daniel has engaged him in very basic psychological therapy. Establishing trust. Defining boundaries, well - negotiating boundaries he thinks would be more…accurate. Daniel has mostly listened to Will although he has kept notes. Notes that Will has not seen and no doubt full of questions that Daniel has not asked him yet. Daniel doesn't think the encephalitis has returned. Will has not scheduled any appointment to find out. He supposes he should to rule it out.

Will considers possible correlations between Daniel's therapy and his episodes of lost time. At least there have been no flashes of light or vibrating walls when he has been with Daniel. But, Daniel did say he would tell him and he has. Will did hallucinate and zone out in Daniel's office frequently. Sometimes Will was aware, other times, he wasn't. Daniel sometimes had to prompt him back, and one time Daniel had slapped Will pretty hard to bring him back. The more Will had talked about what had happened to him, the more frequent the lapses became and the deeper into his mind he seemed to go.

Just like with Hannibal.

I'm experiencing hallucinations. Maybe I should get a brain scan.

Will. Stop looking in the wrong corner for an answer to this.

It seems like Daniel told him each time it had happened, but did he really? Will wouldn't know or remember. Will has taken Daniel at his word. Daniel has no motive to mess with Will or his mind like Hannibal had. Daniel's affection for him is genuine and evident in everything he does. Daniel has been trying to help him, and Will does feel like Daniel is helping. Daniel has provided him with a sense of stability. He feels safe…with Daniel.

I feel like I've dragged you into my world.

I got here on my own. But I appreciate the company.

Will feels like banging his head against the closest wall. He had felt safe with Hannibal, too. He wasn't experiencing lost time before he started seeing Daniel. He didn't tell Daniel about his hallucinations in his office or the lost time when it started happening at his apartment. He has not told Daniel about his dreams. He has only related to Daniel the events of his life after meeting Hannibal. He did not know Daniel until he walked into his office after reading his curriculum vitae. Daniel did not know him, either.

Daniel is not planning on publishing papers on the walking freak show that is Will Graham. Not unless he wants to face a formal inquiry on his conduct. He has actually raised more questions than he has found answers to. Daniel has caused Will to think about events differently and that is good thing. It is good for Will to get out of his own head. He had wanted Daniel to be the wall that could withstand his ball of crazy.

Daniel has actually adapted very well. His particular type of empathy does give him an advantage over the other psychiatrists Will has known over the years whether as patient or as acquaintance. Until Hannibal, none had blurred the line between the patient and doctor relationship. Not even Alana. Alana had treated him like a patient even when Will had not been her patient.

Y*ou wouldn't be good for me, and I wouldn't be able to stop analyzing, because I have this professional curiosity about you and…*

Daniel has managed to reconcile his professional obligations to Will with his personal feelings. Will doesn't think Daniel differentiates between his professional and his personal curiosity about him, at least not any more. Daniel probably thinks Will is not good for him either, yet he has put himself at risk to help him regardless. And, Daniel analyzes Will all the time, and Will doesn't have a problem with that. He wouldn't have had a problem with Alana either, but Alana had a problem reconciling intimacy with professional curiosity without Will being her patient. Daniel has been willing to use whatever skill and insight he has to help Will. He has completely disregarded the professional and personal boundaries between doctor and patient. Just like Hannibal had.

Intimacy has become part of the therapy because intimacy is part of the problem. Will supposes intimacy will be part of the cure. He knows Daniel has wrestled with this, but the fact remains that Daniel did cross those boundaries and he continues to do so. Will had been a stranger to him and yet he has found Will compelling enough to bend and break rules of professional conduct over.

Will remembers what Chilton had told him about a conversation with Hannibal over dinner, before Gideon had reduced Chilton to vegetarianism.

Psychic driving fails because its methods are too obvious. You were trying too hard, Frederick. If force is used, the subject will only surrender temporarily. Once a patient is exposed to the method of manipulation, it becomes much less effective.

When Dr. Gideon began - to suspect he was being pushed –

He pushed back. The subject mustn't be aware of any influence.

The flashes and the lost time occur after he leaves his sessions with Daniel. He was with Daniel all weekend and the day after they return; bam! Will has an episode. Before the trip, he was with Daniel several times a week. No way of telling if there is or is not a correlation. He was seeing Daniel too many times a week to definitively make a connection.

Daniel learns more about him all the time. Several sessions a week would provide plenty of opportunity to manipulate. With his empathy, Daniel might not need flashing lights and drugs to accomplish…

Will realizes he sounds paranoid. Of course Daniel didn’t pull some psychiatric gas lighting on him. Will knows he is being irrational because he does exhibit symptoms of PTSD from the stress of the trauma he obviously has not recovered from and the constant anxiety he experiences on an endless loop every moment, whether asleep or awake. He is so stressed out right now he does not even trust Daniel.

But he does. When he is rational, he does. This mindset is why he feels crazy.

He tries to recall when the other instances of flashes of light and the room changing had occurred. The flashes had accompanied black outs then, too. He is not taking any drugs and neither has Daniel given him any. Will has taken nothing stronger than aspirin and if he is completely honest with himself; whiskey.

Daniel had suggested his mind is trying to work through some things. Will thinks that may be true. Between the relentless dreams and the waking hallucinations, it would seem his mind is trying to tell him something. It is possible that Daniel’s therapy is helping to open some of the forts he keeps locked up in his mind. Forts that Will has avoided opening himself.

His fear keeps him from opening up those forts. He used to use his fear to fuel his imagination. Now, he fears what he will find, what he will remember. When he had sat in his cell at BSHCI, fear had not kept him from trying to remember. He had been afraid, but he had dealt with the realities of his situation. He is afraid that now, the remembering will reveal truths that will break him apart. He knows he has changed. What frightens him is learning just how much.

Will often wonders if he is permanently damaged, if the therapies and mind games he has been exposed to and the ones he has subjected himself to have rearranged his brain so much that he will never fully recover, that he will lose who he was…before.

All I heard was my heart, dim but, but fast, like, um footsteps fleeing into silence. I don't know how to gauge who I am anymore. I don't feel like myself. I feel like I have been gradually becoming different for a while. I just feel like somebody else.

What do you feel like?

I feel crazy.

And that is what you fear most.

I fear not knowing who I am.

Will knows who he is. ***I Know Who I Am…***

Sometimes with, uh, what I do –

What you do is you take all of the evidence available at a crime scene. You extrapolate. You reconstruct the thinking of a killer. You don't think of yourself as the killer.

I got lost in the reconstruction. Just for a second. Just a blink…

We don't want to break you here. Is that what's happening? Have I broken you?

Do you have anyone that does this better unbroken than I do broken?

Fear makes you rude, Will.

I Know Who I Am…

No. All sense of who you are has been distorted by your illness. You know who you are in this moment. That's not always the case, Will.

I KNOW WHO I AM!

Does he? *I'm not sick…* Daniel had dryly pointed out that Will might have a better chance at recovery if he could avoid traumatic events rather than actively seeking them out. Daniel had compared him to a diabetic addicted to chocolate.

Will had pointed out that the chocolate eating diabetic was not saving lives. Daniel had responded with a tart, *Well, certainly not his own.*

Will sighs as he stands at the bottom of the steps. He would really like to shake this feeling off. Has he lost so much faith in humanity that he distrusts everyone? He tells himself that Daniel is not Hannibal. He repeats it like a mantra as he walks into the living room.

He hears the music from the living room before he enters and he knows Daniel sits at his laptop, probably feeding his dogs half of his dinner yet again. Will smirks at the thought of Daniel's chubby dogs. Will had never indulged his dogs the way Daniel indulges his. Of course, Will could let his pack run free over a couple miles of fields all year round. Daniel's dogs are limited to leashes and parks, and it is too hot in the summer to leave them outside too long for any reason.

Diet is really the culprit here thinks Will. Daniel is a push over, incapable of saying "no" the furry little creatures he loves. Will is aware he too qualifies as one of Daniel's furry little creatures, more or less. Daniel doesn't say "no" much to Will either. He does manage to get Will to do what he wants though…

Will returns his thoughts to the dogs. Daniel had actually fed them cheese this evening. He had stood in the kitchen and grated a chunk of real provolone over their dry food. Will had said nothing but had stood and watched the dogs perched at Daniel's feet waiting patiently for their dinner. Daniel had stopped grating the cheese for a second when he had looked up to see the disapproval all over Will's face. His mouth had scrunched up as he had tried not to laugh, but had given up as his shoulders had shaken with muted snickers. He had even started to explain, but had given that up, too when Will had not changed his accusing expression.

Will has decided that there are quite a few items in the fridge that, like the cheese, the dogs would be better off without. Will thinks if he can make them disappear slowly enough, Daniel might not notice.

Will walks into the living room, Daniel's cotton tee and drawstring pajama bottoms fitting him well enough. The A/C kicks on and hums from the window as Daniel sits engrossed in his computer screen, seemingly unaware of Will, but Will knows that is not the case. Will feels him empathizing, feels the familiar calm mist hover and then envelop him.

"You knew I was here, before you heard me, didn't you?" Will says from his edge of the rug.

Daniel turns around from the computer, pen in mouth. "Yes." He mumbles and shuffles his bare feet along the hardwood along the edge of the rug while Will stands upon the rug on his side of the room.

"You sense me before you see me."

"Yes…but, I uh, try and give you your space." Daniel continues to roll the pen around his mouth. Will wonders if he is aware he does that. He thinks "yes" is the most likely answer to that.

"Not really. You don't um…put your shields up anymore, with me, do you?"

"I haven't no. I do monitor your emotions. You are, among other things…still my patient." Daniel pauses and when Will doesn't comment he asks, "Would you rather I did?"

Will shakes his head, looks aside, begins to speak, and then closes his mouth tightly. He looks at Daniel from across the room, and folds his arms across his chest. Will's not sure what he wants at the moment. If Daniel has been monitoring him all this time, what harm is there if he continues?

The uniqueness of their relationship has its benefits. The heightened empathy between them can be quite…pleasurable - but perhaps not necessary all the time.

"Well, I do." Will says.

"I know. Sometimes I can read you, sometimes I can't. You said that when we both have our mental defenses up, you feel alone. Is that still the case?"

“If you have been open every time we are together, then I couldn’t know. What are you asking, really?”

Daniel can feel the impatience, and something else, a tension that causes Daniel’s muscles to tighten along his spine and ache beneath his jaw. The tension could be from any number of things this evening. And Will has never needed an excuse to be angry. Daniel decides what he feels from Will is not anger, it is something else. Doubt? Misgiving? Daniel struggles to define what it is he is feeling.

“Do you need to feel alone? I don’t have to monitor you twenty-four seven, I just do because I can. Now that you are here, maybe a little head space between us is a good idea. Is that what you are asking for?

Daniel grins from his chair. How typical of Will to stand at the edges of the room while he attempts to ask for more space. Daniel recognizes that Will doesn’t want to offend him; the entire situation is very awkward for him.

“I know you read me, too. I know that you do because you can’t help it either. We live alone for a reason. I thought I was making you more comfortable. If that’s not the case, I’ll put the shield up for you.”

And we can go back square one; pretend we haven’t been intimate... Will finishes for him and then catches himself. That is not what Daniel means. Will takes a deep breath and exhales slowly as though doing so could expel the suspicious thoughts from earlier like the noxious fumes that they are. Daniel still sits facing him from across the rug on his swivel chair. He is waiting for an answer and Will doesn’t want to give him one. Whatever he says will come off as…rude.

Will would laugh aloud except Daniel will think he has become completely unhinged. Which might not be far from the truth…

“Will? This isn’t really about privacy, is it?” Daniel can feel Will withdrawing from him. Daniel realizes Will’s agitation is directed at him for some reason.

“No… I don’t think I can explain without sounding…paranoid or something worse.”

The two of them stare at each other a moment, the few feet of patchwork carpet between them might as well be miles thinks Daniel. He has not felt such…wariness from Will before. Daniel cannot imagine what he has done to cause Will to feel this way, but Daniel is certain that Will believes he has done something. The undercurrent of violence, of that pacing wild thing in Will is dangerously close to the surface.

Will watches Daniel sitting pensive and attentive at his desk, one foot idly stroking Cara at his feet. Will cracks his neck, tries to bury his anxiety and doubts. He can’t. Daniel’s mist retreats from him, he can feel it evaporate from his mind like rain on hot concrete. Will has succeeded in making Daniel uncomfortable enough to emotionally withdraw from him too.

“The loss of time today has you wound pretty tight.” Daniel says carefully aware he is walking on egg shells of the most fragile kind. “Has something like what happened today happened at your place before? Besides the time you called me about?”

Daniel decides to pick Will’s brain and see what falls out. His questions will either yield some answers or provoke Will. If Will acts on his feelings that too will provide some insight into what he is thinking. Eventually…

“Yeah, but only for a few minutes, not for hours, not that I could tell. I am still the unreliable narrator of my own life.”

Will begins to look around the room, his eyes drawn to the bookcases. He glances back at Daniel but remains where he is, his toes curling around the fabric of the rug.

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s all up there…” Daniel points to his head, “we just haven’t accessed it yet. You just lost your home, Will. Not your real home, but you’ve been displaced. You feel like a charity case. Already my patient, now you’re living here…you’ve got to feel…compromised. Vulnerable. Maybe even angry? I would.”

Will nods from his end of the rug, realizes he is hugging himself and straightens his arms. He feels so edgy if he could crawl out of his own skin, he would.

Daniel gets up out of his chair and crosses the room to open a cabinet and retrieves a sock. He reaches up to the top shelf of one of the bookcases and pulls down what appears to be a hookah, polished reddish wood and smooth glass catch the light as Daniel returns to his desk. Will watches Daniel sit back down and take out a plastic bag from the sock. He can smell the pungent odor of hashish and cannabis from where he stands as soon as Daniel opens the bag. Will walks quickly across the room to stand beside Daniel’s desk.

“That is what I think it is, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m going to light up with a Fed.” Daniel grins as he pinches off a bit of the sticky substance between his thumb and forefinger. The look on Will’s face is priceless. Will should see himself right now.

“Ex-Fed. What is that…exactly?” Will manages.

Will is unbelieving Daniel would shift gears on him like this and get high. Will tells himself it is Daniel’s house…

“Oh, what…you’re going to be snob about this, too?” Daniel teases.

Will laughs despite how his nerves prickle beneath his skin. “No…still ticked I questioned your taste in wine?”

“There’s nothing wrong with my…taste.” Daniel says.

Will catches his eyes and feels the mist returning, edging closer, gentle wisps that touch his mind as soft as breath. “I mean what’s it called?”

“Oh, I have no idea. It’s Moroccan hash mixed with some really good shit from the Netherlands. I think he said it was Dutch Salad or something like that.”

“How much do you pay for something like that?”

“For this? Already mixed it was like twenty dollars a gram. I bought half an ounce. Anything else you’d like to know, officer?”

Will shakes his head at Daniel watches him stuff the pot salad into the bowl of the hookah. Daniel takes out a lighter from a drawer in his desk and promptly lights the bowl, inhaling as the water gurgles. He coughs as he holds out the hookah to Will.

"I know I said no drugs for you, but the effects are temporary and it will help you relax. I need to relax."

Will shakes his head. "You uh, indulge often? How long does half an ounce last?"

"I'll make it last a while. You know, you can even smoke it in public here? Well, in some cities more than others, but Florence is really liberal. I mean…really liberal." Daniel coughs again.

"Florence has a history of being liberal. Got themselves into plenty of trouble with Rome for being so…liberally unrepressed."

"Sure you won't smoke with me?"

Will shakes his head, again.

Daniel shrugs and commences to take a few more hits. He turns up the music and Will recognizes Bach's *Air on a G String.* Daniel leans over to pet the dogs on either side of him. The dogs revel in the attention and for a moment Will feels invisible as he observes Daniel slip off the chair to rough up his dogs, his glasses sliding off his nose, pajama bottoms slung low about his hips and gathering around his heels as he rolls around with Bella and Cara on the rug.

Will pulls another chair up to the desk and looks at the laptop. The internet is up now. He could check his email when Daniel is done doing whatever he is doing. Will sees Daniel has left his email open. Will glances at Daniel rolling around on the floor with the dogs. He hesitates and then peers into the screen to scan Daniel's email. His eyes scroll quickly over names he does not recognize until he sees one he does.

Will is stunned. Daniel received an out of office email from Frederick Chilton. Will stares at the email. Daniel received it earlier today…

Daniel finally climbs back up into his chair to face Will. He is pleasantly buzzed if the droopy eyelids and blissful smile are any indication. He begins to pack the wooden bowl again. Instead of lighting it himself, he holds the exotic little hookah out to Will once more.

"Will, it's ok. Italy's pretty much decriminalized it."

"It's not that…"

Daniel tosses his head back to better enjoy the buzz. He has his reasons for introducing the pot to Will, but he does not want to frame getting stoned as therapy. He would like to see what associations Will makes under the influence before he discloses the purpose for it. And, Will does need to relax. Daniel needs him to relax.

"Well, I really needed to unwind. I thought after your shitty day, you'd like to join me. I could say it's for medicinal purposes."

"That wouldn't be far from the truth, would it?" Will gestures towards the laptop screen. "Were you contacting Frederick about my meds?"

“Shit. Once a cop always a cop, huh? You really know how to kill a buzz…” Daniel rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Will, I can imagine what you’re thinking…”

“No, Daniel, I really don’t think you can.”

Daniel’s jaw goes tight as he berates himself for not deleting Chilton’s automatic response earlier. He wanted to tell Will about that his own way, too. He even watched Will pull up a chair to his desk and the thought Will would be parked right in front of his laptop didn’t even cross his mind.

Will’s imagination creates multiple scenarios in his mind about Chilton’s possible role and the reasons for Daniel contacting him. Will thinks maybe his suspicions about Daniel are not so unfounded after all. There is no reason to contact Chilton about him, none at all. Unless Daniel believes Will is unreliable. As if Chilton wouldn’t be sniffing opportunity all the way from Baltimore.

If Daniel has betrayed him, Will’s not sure what he might do to him…

Will begins to rise from his chair. Daniel grabs his arm. Will lets Daniel’s hand rest for a second before he wrests his arm away and scoots his chair back and away. Daniel sees Will’s eyes cloud up as Will glares at him, past him to someplace else. Daniel feels him slipping away.

“Oh no.” Daniel says, “Don’t you retreat on me. Not before I can explain.” Daniel realizes Will is contemplating all sorts of reasons for the email and none of them positive.

“Retreat? Hardly. I think I’ve retreated enough with you.”

The words spill before Will can stop them. It feels good to say them. He feels a certain satisfaction in the alarm rising in Daniel. How does Daniel respond to fear?

“What are you talking about? Retreated enough…what do you think I’ve done?” There is nothing calm or compassionate about Will’s expression now. Will’s eyes are as distant as Daniel has ever seen them and he knows that is not a good thing.

“What are you contacting Chilton about?” His voice is so accusing that Daniel winces.

“I said I would explain, but you have got to calm down. I will not have a conversation with you like this…”

“We don’t have to have a conversation…in fact, I don’t *feel* much like having a conversation.”

“Oh? What do you feel?” Daniel says, starting out of his own chair.

“Like punching the shit out of you. What the fuck, Daniel?” Will stands in front of Daniel’s chair to block him from getting up. Daniel’s hands grip the arm of the chair tightly prepared to knock Will out of his way if he has to…

Daniel closes his eyes. He is mirroring Will’s emotions. He doesn’t want to slug Will. He knows seeing Chilton’s email set him off, but Will was lit dynamite when he walked into the living room. Will has felt too much since yesterday. Blowing up is to be expected Daniel tells himself. He knows Will will eventually tell him what is eating at him, but whether he does that before or after he takes a swing at him is Daniel’s main concern at the moment.

The dogs are alert and edgy at the sharp tones from the humans. Cara has already taken up position between Daniel and Will squeezing in between the two chairs facing each other. Bella paces along the couch. Daniel does not want either dog to go at Will. Daniel implores Will with his eyes as he speaks hoping Will responds to his even tone of voice.

“Let me explain. I’m not going anywhere. You can always try to beat the shit out of me afterwards.” Daniel offers a slight smile and keeps his voice calm, slow and nothing close to challenging.

Will’s expression does not change.

Daniel leans forward and meets Will’s eyes. Will does look pretty menacing at the moment. Daniel tries not to think about Will killing people with his bare hands.

“Let’s take it down a notch. The dogs are getting upset.”

Will glances at Cara at Daniel’s feet and Bella next to the couch. Both dogs are standing on all fours and their ears and eyes are focused intently on Will and Daniel. Will exhales slowly, closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to upset the dogs either. He tells himself to calm down and listen to Daniel’s explanation. He swallows hard, and grips the arms of the chair. The urge to bust Daniel in the mouth with his fist was so strong just then.

But he’s not angry at Daniel. He is experiencing generalized anger at everything and he is misdirecting it all at Daniel. Things keep happening to him it seems. He is galled at his own passivity. He almost took out his frustration on Daniel just now. Maybe some of that hash salad would be a good idea.

“I’m sorry. Seeing that email was just…I already feel like I have no control.” Will looks into Daniel’s face, sees the compassion there and feels even worse.

“Apology accepted. I’d hate to see you really pissed off.” Whatever Will has been thinking about hurts. Daniel can feel it because Will sits across from him unguarded and exposed. He is raw to his bones. Will probably doesn’t even realize his fingers trace across the wound beneath his shirt like a caress.

“Will, you were already in a mindset when you came downstairs. I don’t know what you’ve been thinking about all day, where your mind took you, but whatever you thought about caused you to doubt me. And finding that email must have confirmed every awful thought you had.”

“Manipulation would be the word of the day. My therapy with you has a lot of parallels with Hannibal’s.”

“And that upsets you.”

“Well, yeah. The complete…lack of boundaries for one thing. You are always in my head. And the intimacy…the more I talk to you, the worse my symptoms get.”

“All psychiatry is manipulation. It’s all about getting the patient to reveal things kept buried, either consciously or not. Hannibal helped you see a part of yourself you don’t want to see and…so am I. No wonder it feels the same to you.”

Will leans forward in his chair and rests his elbows on his knees so he can cradle his head in his hands. He can feel the blood pounding in his temples. Daniel is making sense. He always does.

Daniel reaches out his hand knowing that the touch of fingers in his hair will soothe the frayed nerves. He knows Hannibal touched Will the same way for the same reason. The conditioning will always remain, and this association with Hannibal is a positive one for Will. A positive association might lead to other positive associations. Positive associations with Hannibal will cause Will to make those associations with himself.

Will needs to see Hannibal through another lens besides the dark microscope Will insists on using, or he will continue to see that same darkness in himself. The darkness that caused him to see betrayal in Daniel's actions. Will is seeing betrayal because he has identified with it. He recognizes the Judas he played in Hannibal's eyes. Daniel needs to help Will identify his thirty pieces of silver. Will still does not know what tipped Hannibal's hand and worse, he cannot figure out when.

Knowing when exactly Hannibal learned of Will's deception is crucial because the meaning of anything Hannibal said to Will hinges on the knowing. Daniel knows this occupies a great deal of space in Will's head at any given time. And there are gaps in Will's narrative that Daniel is certain Will is not cognizant of. But, Daniel will not be opening that can of worms this evening. He can only manage so many worms and so many cans at a time. Will is like the desperate fisherman casting bait in every direction to see what he'll catch. He forgets he invited Daniel to go fishing with him. Daniel will have to remind him.

"And Will?" Daniel says, his fingers smoothing the damp curls on Will's bowed head, "it's important to me that you know, that you appreciate that of all the unorthodox things *we've* done, that of all the boundaries *we've* crossed, treating you as a partner in your own therapy is the most unconventional approach there is. It is the only way I see to gain your trust. You recognize your own need for alternative methods and we have been partners in your therapy. I have not forced you in any way."

Will looks up at Daniel. He has just been scolded in the gentlest of terms, but scolded nonetheless. Daniel wants Will to take responsibility for his own part in breaking rules. They will be breaking a lot more, of that Will is certain.

He edges closer to Daniel, seeking the solace of the descending mist and he covers Daniel's hand with his own. "Message received." He says simply.

Daniel presses his forehead to Will's. "Good."

Will pulls back after a moment, rests his back against the chair to gaze at Daniel. Daniel glances around at the dogs.

"Come here, girls. It's ok." Daniel calls to Bella and Cara. Their ears prick up and they slowly circle the two chairs facing each other finally settling on either side of Daniel's chair. Daniel pats Cara's head until her tail starts thumping against the floor. Will holds out his hand and Cara approaches him, cautiously at first, then rubs her head against his legs.

"Will, I probably should have taken the day off and not left you alone."

"I'm not a child. I can handle it."

“Barely. A lot has happened in the last couple days. A lot between us. A lot going on in your head. And then losing your place…it’s a lot. I am having difficulty processing. I was so distracted today I shouldn’t even bill my patients.”

Will tries to smile, but somehow can’t manage it. “I am starting to feel like I was doing better before I started seeing you.”

“Well, that’s a very honest statement. Why is that?”

“Because of the lost time and some other things I haven’t told you about…yet.”

“But you are about to, right?”

“Yeah…” Will sighs, “I guess I am.” Will points to the laptop. “First things first, though.”

Daniel clicks on the email so that his message to Chilton appears. He invites Will to read it with a nod of his head.

“I’ll explain about the email. And I apologize for that. I contacted Chilton to clarify the drugs he gave you and get his take on what drugs Lecter used on you.”

“I told you what Frederick said…” Will says as he reads.

“Frederick always holds something back. You don’t believe he was entirely truthful and neither do I. He’ll squirm under your thumb until you squeeze it out of him.”

“I thought you didn’t know him, personally. That is a very good description of him.” Will says.

“Oh, I know him. I told you I had met him which was true enough but I’ve met him more than once. I had an extended stay in Baltimore years ago. I had been approached to evaluate the possibility of canine therapy with some of the inmates at BSHCI.”

“Really? I’ve never heard anything about that.”

“And thanks to Chilton you never will. He shot it down. We’ve had our little rows over the years.”

“Why do you want to know what drugs he used with me?”

“Because I want to know more about how your brain has adapted to whatever was done to you. I know what drugs he likely used can do to a normal brain, but yours…well, I need precise information. I’d like to engage in some highly alternative drug therapy with you. And before I can do that, I need to know what you’ve already been exposed to.”

“You want to prescribe drugs for me now? After making a big deal about taking anything at all? What kind of therapy are you talking about?’

“I’ll take one question at a time. I do not want to prescribe any regimen of drugs for you; these would be specific doses of a short duration. I wanted you clean so that I could get a base line of “Will not on drugs,” Daniel says holding his fingers up in mock quotation marks, “To see and feel your natural emotional responses. And I have, for a few weeks now.”

“I’d say you’ve felt quite a lot of emotional responses from me.” Will almost smiles.

“And you still retain a lot of control over your impulses although I don’t think you see it that way. You exercise remarkable control considering what you’ve been through. I have to wonder if it’s really control or blocking.” Daniel pauses and stares into space.

“Sorry, lost my train of thought.”

“Can’t imagine why.” Will says. “And question number three?”

“Oh yeah, I’m talking about some role playing therapy.”

“Role playing? I don’t think I like the sound of that.”

Will doesn’t think; he knows he doesn’t like the sound of it. Daniel wants him to smoke to see how his brain responds to the THC. He wants to gage how Will might respond to other non-prescription drugs. Will is pretty certain Daniel means to try hallucinogenic drugs on him. His mind quickly assesses the possibilities Daniel might be considering by combining hallucinogens with role playing.

“No, Daniel. Absolutely not.”

“Damn, Will. Don’t shut me down so quickly.”

“No way.”

“Well, I still need to talk to Chilton. I wasn’t planning on talking about this tonight. I uh, didn’t handle this very well.”

“I was starting to think you were too perfect, anyway.” Will says.

“Huh, far from it. I wrote down what you said Chilton used for your narcoanalytic interview. A nice way to frame mind fucking.”

“Yeah, I just keep getting fucked by my psychiatrists…”

“Not funny, Will.” Daniel says flatly. “Look, I have some questions about the drugs that have affected your brain and Chilton is the only one I can ask. There isn’t anyone else.”

"No, I guess there isn't."

“I didn’t want to talk about this so soon after…yesterday. God, it was only yesterday. You need time to recover from this weekend. So do I. Let’s agree to wait until I get my information from Chilton. Then I will explain what I have in mind, although you seem to have guessed already. Will you at least hear me out?”

“Because it’s you asking, I will listen. But, no promises. When you talk to Frederick I want to be there.”

“How can you be there in an email?”

“We’re not going to email. We’re going to chat.”

“Oh. A video chat? FBI stuff? You can do that on my laptop.”

“I can do that. On your laptop. Yes.”

“Well, won’t he be surprised.”

“That’s the idea.” Will checks the clock on the wall. “Except it’s really late in Baltimore.”

“I don’t imagine he’s still up on a Monday night.”

“No, I don’t imagine he is. What’s the time difference? Like six hours?”

“Yeah, if we call him early tomorrow morning he’ll still be in his office. I cancelled my appointments tomorrow.”

Will is comforted by that. Will also thinks Daniel looks like he could benefit from sleeping in tomorrow. Whether from the pot or genuine mental fatigue, Daniel is not self-conscious at all.

Daniel has taken off his professional demeanor along with his suit. Will understands people have several faces. The face you wear to work and the face you wear at home. The face you show your boss and the face you show to friends or family.

Daniel has basically stripped away any pretense by removing his professional mask as soon as he walked in the door this afternoon. Daniel is still his doctor but Daniel is also sending the message that Will should feel comfortable here. He watches Daniel tidy up around his laptop, pen once again dangling from his mouth as he removes the empty bottles of water and iced tea.

“Before we do anything else, I need to hear about your dreams, Will. That’s what I planned on talking about this evening.” Daniel waves the pen in the air. “And you wanted to check your own email, right? You said it was down all day?”

“Yeah, odd. Well, the dreams are one of those other things I need to talk to you about. You should probably get your notebook. And I’ll check the email while you do.” Will says to glazed green eyes.

“Right. Just have to find it first…”

Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

The discussion continues about dreams and drugs. Daniel proposes his own duet with Will.

“I have to know myself, before I find him, Daniel.”

“I know. I would be afraid, too. I think once you know, you won’t be afraid anymore.”

“And I’m afraid of that, too.”

Chapter Notes

Click on the YouTube link to listen to Pachelbel's Canon in D.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wpPk8qk3uQ&feature=player_detailpage

Chapter 41

The discussion continues about dreams and drugs. Daniel proposes his own duet with Will.

Will sits next to Daniel on the couch. Sunlight still streams through the windows this warm summer evening. Will likes that it doesn’t get dark until late. Twilight falls close to eight and the days feel long and full. Will is thinking that he won’t miss the cold darkness of winter in Baltimore this year.

A dismal truth beckons from the back of his mind. He can’t stay here. As comfortable as he is in this moment sitting with Daniel on his couch as the afternoon sun alights on the throw rugs and charming furniture and the dogs napping at their feet, Will knows he will likely be looking at the grey walls at FBI headquarters soon enough, hip deep in a formal inquiry and facing indictments that can’t be postponed any longer.

But, not today, Will thinks.

Will has taken Daniel through his recent dreams, an abbreviated sampling that had left Daniel speechless. It had taken him a couple minutes to comment that he had never come across a patient with dreams like Will's. He had been amazed at the detail and impressed with Will's interpretations of his various dreams, especially the episodic nightmare with the serpent tailed eagle.

That is some imagination you have there. And you never know what is going to pop in your head on any night. No wonder you avoid sleeping.

Yeah, it's a regular night at the opera…

Daniel had explained that he believed Will's dreams contained the fragments of memories lost to his conscious mind for the time being. As Will's therapist he wanted to help him recover those memories. As the man sleeping with him, he wanted some insight into the dreams he experiences with Will lying beside him. Daniel is becoming ever more aware of the cost attached to intimacy with Will.

Will knows he shot Abel Gideon, but he has never been able to remember doing it. He knows he talked to Gideon, but he has no memory of the conversation. That was his brain on fire. A memory burned away. He won't ever remember it.

He did, and still does, remember Gideon's conversation with Hannibal at Hannibal's dining room table. Will had stood there, paralyzed with a mild seizure as Hannibal had referred to it. Will had heard every word exchanged between them, had internalized the conversation only to have it resurface weeks later and replay in his mind with perfect clarity.

That had been after Chilton's narcoanalytic interview. That session with Frederick had unlocked a lot of memories for Will. He suspects the flashing lights, syringes, and warm hands that he remembers now in flashes were initially unleashed under Chilton's care.

Will thinks the word care is far too generous for Frederick. Frederick couldn't wait five minutes before running to brag to Hannibal all about the session despite Will only agreeing to the psychiatric testing in the first place in exchange for Frederick's secrecy, explicitly secret from Hannibal.

Chilton could be forthcoming when he wanted to be; when there was something in it for him and even then, he might still renege once he got what he wanted.

Daniel should not trust Chilton by any stretch, but he has a point. He might be able to discern a lot more about Frederick than the average person even from a video camera mounted on a laptop. Will has seen Daniel in action enough to figure he can handle Chilton.

Daniel insists Will has other memories, more recent memories that the trauma of his wound has buried deep within his subconscious and locked in the language and imagery of his dreams. Telling Daniel about his dreams gives Daniel access to a part of himself he has not ever shared, with anyone. Access to his dreams and thoughts would be incredibly revealing and he knows why Daniel wants to know about them, to experience them in his unique way. Will's dreams would provide a shortcut, and a sort of symbolism that would guide Daniel in his therapy, like a legend deciphering the map of Will's brain.

Will struggles with the symbolism himself. It might be a good idea to let Daniel have a crack at decoding it. Daniel offers a departure from the path that Will has traveled too many times to count. His fresh perspective might actually find something Will has overlooked. Recent events have taught him that he is neither infallible nor immune from consequences.

“What is that you’ve been playing?” Will asks he gestures toward the laptop as yet another Vivaldi violin concerto begins.

“An old relaxation cd I loaded. It is relaxing isn’t it?”

“Very. You only listen to classical?”

“Oh no, I play a very different mix at the gym. I listen to music all the time. Keeps me sane. I was thinking you should try it.”

“Listening to music?”

“It is the twenty first century. You could plug into an ipod, ignore all the stimulation; your unsociable nature would not be noticed at all. Other people would leave you alone without you snarling at them.”

“I drink.” Will says, “Not a very creative solution, is it?”

“I did that too. I tried all kinds of remedies to tune out and recover from a day of interacting with people. I remember as a kid not being to sleep because my mind simply would not shut off at night. I tried sleep aids when I got older but you already know how that goes. Can’t wake up right the next morning.”

Will nods. “What else did you try?”

“Sports, of course. Nothing like tired muscles to induce sleep. But yeah, music, meditation, and yoga…pot. Usually in some combination. Why do you think I walk around with earbuds? We both cope as best we can.”

“So that’s what you are doing. Tuning out other people. And it works?”

“For me, yeah. Works well enough. For you…I don’t know. You might have to teach yourself how to focus since you don’t need to hear or see what is going on in front of you to uh, dissociate or retreat into your mind.”

“Huh. The music might augment the experience. I might associate the music with a memory.”

“And considering what we are trying to accomplish in therapy that might be a good thing.”

“It might.” Will lifts his head. Daniel pokes him in the ribs and is rewarded with one of Will’s tantalizing little smiles.

“You already have. You were sitting at the piano when you zoned out. Can you play?”

“Yeah. I used to. Took piano lessons as a kid, but I had an ear for it so even when we moved around I still played when I could. I have a piano at my house, in Wolf Trap…”

“What were you playing at the piano?”

“Beethoven.”

“Classical training, too, huh? So you remember what you played before your mind took you someplace else? Was the music connected?”

"Well, yes. I remember what I was thinking as I played. At least I remember until I don't."

"What's the last thought you do remember?"

Will thinks a moment. "I was thinking about my dreams, trying to figure out the imagery, the peculiar language and symbolism embedded in the images of the dreamscape and…how Hannibal fits into them, because I know he does."

"After what you told me, I think so, too. You associate the piano with Hannibal?"

"I would be surprised if there was something I didn't associate with him at this point."

It is apparent to Daniel that Will is aware he never left the universe he and Hannibal created together. Daniel considers the possibility that neither has Hannibal. And after hearing about Will's dreams, it is abundantly clear that Hannibal has framed his relationship with Will as an odyssey of mythic proportions, casting himself and Will as the lone heroes. Will's dreamscapes often exist there too because his dreams reflect his reality. Hannibal dominates his reality.

Will expected the wound Hannibal gave him to release him from the codependency they had inflicted on each other, to rip the darkness from him, to redeem him somehow, but instead of sending him adrift, it keeps him anchored in their universe. If Will had wanted to sever their bond; he does not want to now. Despite his claims to want Hannibal out of his head he grapples with his emotions still.

All of Will's desires are driven by his fear. His fear revolves around Hannibal. Around and around it goes like a carousel gone mad.

Daniel does know the universe he exists in has nothing to do with Hannibal. Will has his own. Will is not going to find him in that universe. But that is only one reason Will exists there. Helping Will come to grips with the other reasons is another matter entirely. This is why Daniel has to join Will in his universe. Will doesn't exist in his. Not completely.

Now that Daniel is aware of the scope of that exclusive universe, he hopes that between the two of them they can figure out its structure. Will is seeking the supports for that structure.

Will was disappointed that the file his source sent him did not contain much insight into the foundation for that structure. Daniel also knows Will's mind will take those meager threads and weave them into the version of Hannibal he continues to synthesize and rearrange. Will is likely doing that right now as he sits listening to the music.

Daniel can only assist on an academic level. It is Will who has experienced the awful brilliance and the madness of Hannibal's universe. It is Will who carries the weight of that experience like a heavy stone.

"Did Hannibal compose music?" Daniel asks, looking for patterns in Hannibal's behavior, for insight into the pathology of the man beneath the killer.

"Yes, he did. On a harpsichord." Will raises his eyebrows in response to the toss of Daniel's head.

"Of course he did. A piano would be so mundane. He writes his life like he writes the notations for his musical compositions. He sees people as notes on a page."

“Yes, and I have a starring role.” Will rubs at his jaw with his knuckles, as he frowns.

“Will, he doesn’t want you to merely play his opus, he wants you to help him write it.”

“He’s always sending me invitations…”

“I think you are correct about your dreams in the burned out forest being connected to your pursuit of Hannibal. You are pursuing him intellectually at this point and your mind is trying to reconcile and recall every scrap of information in your head.”

“And it comes to me scrambled. I know.”

“Explains why you feel crazy sometimes. It is amazing to me that your dreams are so closely aligned to your waking life. There is virtually no barrier between your subconscious and your conscious. I have never seen anything like that before. As you get more information, your dreams will shift.”

“I have no doubt about that.”

“And that frightens you. Because of what you’ll learn about Hannibal?’

“Because of what I’ll learn about myself.”

“I hate that you have to do this at all because I see how painful it is for you.”

“It is painful for you, too. That’s me, spreading misery wherever I go. I never meant to drop all this at your door. Literally, at your door.”

“Well, you are here now…” Daniel pauses to poke Will’s knee with his finger, “You didn’t come to me to learn about Hannibal, it’s all in there already. You came to me to sort it out. So you can figure out who you are now. Who this person is who survived.”

“I have to know myself, before I find him, Daniel.”

“I know. I would be afraid, too. I think once you know, you won’t be afraid anymore.”

“And I’m afraid of that, too.”

Daniel cannot imagine what it must be like to exist in a state of constant fear as Will does. As he looks into Will’s eyes he can see what the fear does to him. There is so much pain and sadness there that even when Will laughs, his eyes reflect his wounded soul. No matter what he feels at any moment, fear is the constant companion that taints all of his other emotions, even love.

The fear is there even now as Will sits beside him, running his fingers through the tousled curls that fall back over his eyes despite his efforts to keep them back. The fear is as much a part of him as the heart beating in his chest.

“About your dreams…you know most of us don’t remember our dreams. Dreaming is the brain shutting down to process all the anxiety and purge it from the system allowing us to resume absorbing more anxiety the next day. Only with you, you remember your dreams. And your dreams are very vivid.”

“So are yours.”

“Only since I started sleeping with you.”

“You say it like it’s a bad thing. Do you mean the dreaming or the sleeping with me?”

Daniel appreciates the teasing but stays focused. His proximity to Will makes it hard enough to focus as it is.

“Will, we’re not supposed to have such vivid dreams. It happens occasionally, but not like you. You not only dream in Technicolor but your dreams are almost like an alternate reality. Dreams aren’t supposed to intrude on your waking life.”

Dreams prepare us for waking life.

It's one thing to dream; it's another to understand the nature of the dream.

You're waking up to who you are. That's all you need to understand.

Will is beginning to feel like he can’t tell the difference between his waking life and dreaming because they feel the same to him. One does not feel any more or less real than the other while he is experiencing them. Dreaming is guided by emotion and dreams cross-connect with memories. What is the nature of his dreams?

“All that stress has to have a cumulative effect. You are essentially awake all the time.” Daniel says.

“So, I am essentially walking around sleep deprived. You think my lost time is simply sleep deprivation?

“I wouldn’t characterize it as simple. If it is sleep deprivation, the long term effects are bad. Disorientation. Irritability turning to aggression. Paranoia… Sound familiar?”

“I know what happens when I don’t get enough sleep. I do sleep. Not for long periods, but I do manage to get some sleep. But maybe not enough - so maybe the lost time is sleeping?”

“That…is a possibility. Your mind recognizes it needs a break and it gives you one. That is potentially dangerous, too.”

“I don’t drive…”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. Your mind could fracture into the different personalities you have become. You dissociate when you profile a crime scene so you can think like the killer. But you can dissociate whenever you choose. Does it ever happen involuntarily?

“No. That has never happened. Hannibal tried that one already. Even as sick as I was, I knew who I was. I wasn’t that kind of crazy and I couldn’t see myself in the copy-cat murders.”

“But if you became someone else when you blacked out, lost time, you might not remember doing it.”

“You just described my original defense strategy. Daniel, when I get in the killer’s mindset, I am still aware of me. I may narrate like you heard me do on the recording I gave you, but I am aware of me and I feel the victim, too.”

“Will, if you were the right kind of sick, or sleep deprived you could lose yourself. You told me this very thing happened when you profiled that girl in Delaware, the one Georgia killed while she was sick with Cotard’s Syndrome.”

“I did become disoriented for a second. But I was sick. And…I remembered doing it. I was aware. I told Jack I got lost in the reconstruction because it was easier to tell him that than correct his misperception of how my empathy works.”

“The cause for your symptoms could still be stress possibly compounded by lack of REM sleep that is if you aren’t dreaming but hallucinating. Your mind never shuts off it seems.”

“But I do dream. And I wake up. I may wake up a lot, but I am waking up.”

“You *woke up* on my piano bench, too. Were you asleep or in some other state?”

“Well, those are good questions, doctor. I want to know the reason for the lost time with specificity.”

“Ok. Did you call about a scan for the encephalitis yet?” Daniel feels the alarm from Will as thoughts of yet another possible disorder are introduced onto his already full plate.

“No.” Will says quietly.

“I’m not going to ask why not. You can give me the results when you do.”

Daniel stretches his legs out from his seat on the couch and grins until Will grins back. The grin has a ripple effect on Will and Daniel can feel the tightness leaving his own limbs somewhat as Will reclines further into the couch. Daniel prefers the laugh lines to the grim granite like expression Will has been wearing most of the evening.

Will promises himself he will call about the scan this week. But he’s pretty sure his lapses of time are not related to any physical illness. The flashes of light and the hallucinations seem to occur randomly. He can see no pattern. Stress and lack of sleep do affect him, but he has lived with both for a long time. He concurs with Daniel. Like his dreams, his mind is trying to arrange and assimilate information in his mind. The flashes and hallucinations are the manifestations of his mind at work.

His mind has changed because he has changed.

Killing is changing the way I think…

“Will? Knowing what you dream about is just as important as what you think about.” Daniel is saying, “I felt your emotions when you told me your dreams. My own dreams are as disturbing to me as yours are to you but I could only infer so much…”

“Still, you are feeling my emotions after the fact. You can’t associate the images in my dreams with my emotions directly, not in real time, only afterwards. And you aren’t dreaming what I am dreaming. You aren’t in my dream. You can’t see what’s happening.”

“Well, that’s what we’ve got to work with so we’ll run with it.”

“That’s what we have to work with for now. You aren’t satisfied with those limitations. That’s why you contacted Chilton. That’s what the role playing is about.”

“Yes. Drugs can be a gateway into self-reflection and with us, other applications. I think our empathic connection could be useful. But…I’m about done analyzing you for now. Are you sure you won’t join me in an herbal nightcap?”

Daniel gets up to retrieve the hookah and the baggie from his desk. He flops back down on the couch and puts his feet up on the coffee table as he begins to stuff the bowl. He looks up to see Will glancing around the living room as he considers Daniel’s invitation. Daniel imagines Will is revising his profile of him to include habitual drug abuser.

“You want me to get stoned with you in preparation for the role playing.”

“It would help, yes.”

The bowl glitters red as Daniel holds the lighter and draws on the pipe. He closes his eyes as he exhales. Pachelbel’s Canon in D queues up as the smoke leaves his puckered lips. His mouth spreads into a wide grin.

“I love this piece.” Daniel says as he holds the hookah absently. His hands and feet move in time to the pretty violin concerto.

“Can you play this one?” Will looks to the violin case leaning against the piano.

“Oh yeah…” He sets the hookah on the coffee table and begins to hum along with the melody Will assumes corresponds to the violin section Daniel usually plays. Pachelbel’s Canon is a beautiful piece of music and Will knows it well.

“Hey,” Daniel says, almost leaping from the couch, “I’ve got sheet music for this. You can play, right?”

“Not violin.”

“No, but piano. I’ve got an arrangement for piano and violin. We could play a duet.” Without a second thought, Daniel is off to his piano bench rooting through the books and pages of sheet music. He finds what he is looking for and returns holding a flimsy booklet that he hands to the surprised Will.

“Daniel, I am really out of practice…” Wills sets the booklet in his lap and flips open the pages of sheet music. The arrangement is not incredibly complicated, but it would be challenging.

“So what? Like I play concert halls on my weekends?”

He rejoins Will on the couch, sitting closer this time, so close that his shoulder touches Will’s. Daniel deliberately rests his knee on Will’s thigh and smiles into Will’s face. He reaches for the hookah and lighter and holds it out to Will.

“Insistent aren’t you?” Will says taking the hookah from Daniel’s fingers. He holds the lighter over the bowl and pauses, “You know, I haven’t done this in a really long time…”

“I won’t be offended if you don’t. It’s mellow…won’t make you stupid, unless you want to get stupid.” Daniel grins again, more broadly this time.

Will is not sure he wants to be even a little stupid. He knows this will make him feel more relaxed than whiskey and more quickly, too. He knows what to expect with whiskey. He knows how this will affect him which is why it has been a long time. He already feels too much. He considers that just a little will take the edge off.

Daniel is really relaxed. Amusingly so. And he is so enthusiastic about this duet that his emotions are infectious. Will thinks Daniel has surmised he played duets with Hannibal. Will knows this is Daniel's way of introducing the associative drug therapy he wants to try. He wants to alleviate Will's concerns, ease away the fear of exposing himself to Daniel even more than he already has. The invitation to become more intimate is practically sitting in his lap.

Daniel is very inviting. The large compassionate green eyes get to Will every time he looks into Daniel's face. Sitting on the couch with him like this feels perfectly natural. The mist is warmer suddenly, a flush that moves through Will delicious and hot like liquid sunlight. Will is sure Daniel is aware of the profound effect he has. He feels what Will feels, is feeling it right now. Will thinks that any other time he would have polished off a couple tumblers by this hour. He decides to see just how stupid he can get this evening.

He lights the bowl and teases the smoke tentatively up the glass chamber feeling the burn in his chest. He closes his eyes and holds the heady hash in his lungs as the aroma fills his nostrils and the room. He coughs a little and Daniel nods for him to take another hit. He does and tries to pass the hookah back to Daniel. Daniel pushes it back to him.

“Careful,” Daniel says, watching Will's lips curl around the pipe once more, “that stuff makes you horny.” He laughs at the mischievous half grin and equally mischievous blue eyes.

Will is not stressing anymore. Imagine that. A part of Daniel wishes he could keep Will wrapped in a blissful haze and live in this moment all the time. But that would be selfish, and impossible. And exactly what Hannibal tried to do.

Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Will’s evening becomes even more interesting after he falls asleep. He wakes Daniel up to share it with him.

“Who were you dreaming about?” Will says relieving the stunned Daniel of his boxers. The touch of Will’s fingers along his stiff cock draws the softest of hisses from Daniel.
“You.” Daniel murmurs. He feels heat rise in his cheeks and it spreads like fire until his entire body is enflamed with a powerful longing. Daniel recognizes the heat is not his alone.
“Who were you dreaming about?” Daniel says noticing Will in a similar state.
A pause, “Hannibal.” comes the quiet reply.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 42

Will’s evening becomes even more interesting after he falls asleep. He wakes Daniel up to share it with him.

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream. The Poe quote has been running around Will’s head for several minutes now. Will thinks he must be tired to seek insight from the drug addicted poet. He takes a deep breath as the ceiling fades from view.

Will tries not to toss and turn as he lies in bed. He knew the pot salad might affect him like this. His mind used to become hyper wired on it in school, everything he had touched and smelled and watched all day long would infuse his drug induced day dreaming like a match to gasoline, setting his thoughts on fire until, finally the flames of thought burned out and he would fall into fitful dreams.

And all that was before he started hunting serial killers.

But, a little pot had helped him study and write well-crafted and insightful papers. He had been able to sit and write for hours, relaxed and lost in his thoughts for as long as it took.

The emotional roller coaster he has been on for the last few days has taken its toll. Will turns to his side to face the door that opens onto the hallway and Daniel’s room, the sheet pulled to his waist and the blanket tossed to the floor. The temperature is at least ten degrees warmer upstairs than it is downstairs despite the air conditioner.

As it had in college, the pot had relaxed Will, but his thoughts had buzzed around in his head like so many flies, a swarm he could not scatter. The effect on Daniel had been obvious. The pot had tickled Daniel's libido but sensing Will's detachment, Daniel had finally called it a night and had gone up to bed after securing Bella in her crate.

He had left his drink on the piano and sheet music spread all over. Will had put his violin back in its case after noticing Daniel had left it on the piano. He had tidied up the living room and then had stood in the middle of the carpet in the light of the singular lamp and had wondered at his own compulsion.

Will had listened to the water run in bathroom, had heard the creak of the bed as Daniel had settled in for the night. He knew he would be welcome to join Daniel, but Daniel would not be able to fall asleep if Will were beside him. Will had waited downstairs giving Daniel time to fall asleep before going upstairs to…what?

Sleep. The elusive concept that still slips through his fingers like a stream.

After talking with Daniel about the possible causes for the lost time, Will has to admit that Daniel's ideas had made sense. Will is thinking that he must be sleeping when it happens. Not the deep REM sleep he really needs, but a state approaching sleep. His mind doesn't dream and he is not conscious. Will thinks his mind is taking a time out so that it doesn't shut down on him.

Daniel had also pointed out that when we dream, we create our dreams from emotions, memories, and the chemicals in our brains. Everyone we interact with in our dreams is an extension of self, manifesting as representations of our emotions and memories. The movie stars or monsters we see in our dreams are projections of our emotions.

In Will's case, his imagination creates an especially well detailed dreamscape and the representations he interacts with are projections laden with symbolism that only Will can decipher because Will interacts with fractured extensions of himself and, Daniel had added, with versions of people created by Will's imagination. The primary emotion driving Will's dreams is fear. Neither Will nor Daniel had had to say that aloud.

We all play the starring role in our dreams, Will, but in your dreams, everyone and everything corresponds to your reality. Either symbolically or…or allegorically and sometimes, directly.

Daniel had suggested Will engage in guided dreaming to see if he can focus his thoughts on what he wants to dream about before he falls asleep.

Will had nodded in agreement but had not mentioned that there were simply too many items on the menu for him to make an informed choice. All were equally tasty.

Before climbing up the stairs with Cara in tow, Daniel had suggested that they both look for patterns, see if Will has more or less episodes now that he is living there. Will had not corrected him about using the word living rather than staying. It had seemed too fine a point to make when Daniel had been nothing but generous.

Daniel is a font of patience and he has so far been pretty good at separating his own emotions from Will's. Will supposes he would have to be able to manage his emotions in order to do his job day in and day out. Daniel had been especially understanding of Will this evening; and Will knows his nerves must be shot to lose his temper as he had. Usually, he is the calm one in a situation.

Will thinks his distorted sense of reality signals to him that his subconscious is working overtime because he has been lost in his imagination with Hannibal. He has been doing so for months. He has actually been living in an altered reality for much longer than that.

So much about this feels like a dream…

No wonder he is falling asleep at piano benches and in bathrooms. The flashes and the hallucinations of another room, another place that appears before his eyes is likely another manifestation of his subconscious. Will has no explanation for that except the hallucinations that come with the flashes are trying to tell him something, too.

He turns his restless mind to the file he received from Luciano and Lucia. Copies of Lithuanian birth certificates for both Hannibal and his sister were included in the file as well as a death certificate for his sister, Mischa. Almost eight years separated Hannibal and his sister and Hannibal would have been about twelve when she died. The copies were of poor quality having been copied from old microfiche, apparently the method for preserving original documents at the time.

Hannibal is nine years older than Will. Will had never thought about their ages before until he had stared at the white on black image of the certificate. How strange to know Hannibal so well and not know his age. To Will, he seems ageless, or rather that he is as he has always been. To see the proof of his birth had seemed so very intimate somehow; had made him seem so much more mortal than the way Will tends to think of him. Will had once described the Chesapeake Ripper to Jack in less than generous terms not knowing he had been describing Hannibal and Will thinks he might have been a little hasty about that.

When Will had been screaming his lungs out in his mother's delivery room, Hannibal had been nine years old and Will is tempted to try and imagine that little boy. A skinny blonde boy chasing waves along the Baltic Sea with a one year old sister watching him from her blanket…

There had not been that much about Hannibal specifically in the file the twins had sent. There was little actual documentation about his family and plenty of insinuation. The email likely written by Lucia had stated that personal records from Lithuania during its time as a Soviet state were hard to come by. She and her brother had evidently cobbled together what they had found and had left it to Will to draw his own conclusions.

Copies had been sent to Mason Verger.

Hannibal was apparently descended from a rather aristocratic family with long roots in Eastern Europe. His was a family with ancient claims to nobility that had not fared well under Soviet occupation. Will imagines the entire family chaffing under Soviet egalitarianism and he no longer has to wonder where Hannibal's sense of entitlement comes from.

Something happened to cause Hannibal and his sister to be orphaned, perhaps separated, and Hannibal had survived while his sister had not.   Some of the family had escaped to Prague, had not fared much better there since Czechoslovakia had also been under Soviet control, and had fled to France.

From what Will can tell, Hannibal had spent a few years at a state run orphanage outside Vilnus, the capital city in Lithuania before setting out to find the extended family in France. The orphanage had been converted from a huge estate home formerly owned by the Lecter family. There had been another estate in the Klaipeda Borough, near the Baltic, the summer home Will thinks.

Will imagines the Lecter estates in their heyday. He can almost see the manicured yards, rooms filled with antiques and likely the finest libraries for miles lined with shelves containing the accumulated knowledge and literature of the Western world. All of it gradually dismantled, bartered, and sold in exchange for retaining the illusion of a life taken from them a piece at a time since the second World War.

Lucia and Luciano had sent Will information on every known property formerly owned by the Lecter family in Lithuania and there had been several and every one of them confiscated by the Soviets. They had also enclosed some information on KGB crackdowns on suspected dissidents in the 1970s, in particular an underground publishing house, but the operators of the group were never found. Perhaps Hannibal's extended family had fled to Prague with help from the same or related dissident group.

Will imagines Hannibal and his family had already down scaled their lifestyle a couple of generations before Hannibal's birth. If his parents had been involved with any dissidents as the email and the inclusion of the news articles seemed to suggest, Will thinks it was possible that Hannibal's parents had somehow managed to draw the attention of the KGB and paid for it with their lives. Will had also read the other news articles, also on microfiche about a small number of missing people found dismembered in the forests beyond the little miesteliai and kaimai, the Lithuanian terms for little towns and settlements around the country. It was significant that the bodies had been scattered around Klaipeda.

The KGB had been blamed for the missing people and the brutally eviscerated corpses, but Will is thinking that perhaps the dismembered corpses had not been the work of the KGB at all. Will rubs at his face wondering if the victims had perhaps been rude. His lids feel heavy and he thinks briefly there should be a word to describe the anticipation of impending slumber.

As his head sinks more deeply into the pillow Will thinks it entirely possible that Hannibal may be the most fascinating study of nature versus nurture he has ever come across. All of the news articles are dated from before Hannibal's birth. How typical that an investigation into Hannibal's past only raises more mysteries than it solves. Will's mind churns as his imagination conjures up a twelve year old ashen haired boy, with only his ancestry to remind him who he is as he suffers likely anonymously and alone through whatever trauma brought him to the orphanage…

Will feels the tug of someone pulling on his hand. He lifts his head from the pillow. A slender blonde haired boy has grasped his fingers and tugs at him to follow pressing a slim finger to his thin lips, beckoning Will to be silent. Will climbs out of his bed and follows Hannibal down a long hallway and flight of stairs to a large kitchen where several other boys sit around an oblong rough-hewn table on benches of nicked and knotted wood.

A turn of the last century stove sits at the far corner and appears to be the only source of heat in the vacuous kitchen. A low flame warms the large pot on the burner and the door to the oven is cracked open to warm the room. The surroundings are sparse and utilitarian, bereft of charm. The kitchen is however, undeniably clean.

Hannibal pulls away from Will, leaving Will to stand silent and invisible at the bottom of the stairs. Hannibal keeps his finger pressed to his lips as he slips in beside another boy on the bench. The child moves away from Hannibal and Will notices a collective shift away from Hannibal from all the boys seated around the table. Will sees the bowls of the other boys are nearly empty as are the baskets of bread that now contain only unwanted crusts.

The feeling that Hannibal is always the last one at the table is unshakable.

Hannibal begins to eat his meal; eyes focused on the sizable bowl of stew before him, potatoes clearly the main ingredient, as he swallows one tepid spoonful after another. In the spoon goes, methodically, quickly, he does not even chew and neither does Hannibal look up.

He does not look up because he already knows what Will is seeing. The boys nudge each other, and they whisper in groups of two or three, glancing at Hannibal the entire time. They all wear uniforms, white shirts and dark pants each with worn sweaters to insulate them from the chill.

The headmaster enters from the other side of the room. He quickly surveys the table, sees the boys sitting around excluding Hannibal, who continues to eat his stew as though he notices nothing. The headmaster yells at the boys to finish up so they can complete their chores before bed. The gaunt headmaster leaves and immediately, one of the boys takes his bowl, cup, and spoon to the sink and elbows Hannibal roughly on the side of his head as he leaves. Each boy pays Hannibal the same unkind tribute after depositing their dirty dishes.

When the last boy has exited the kitchen, Hannibal rises from his seat and after glancing at Will, commences to perform his assigned chore. Kitchen duty. Will watches him wash, dry, and put away the dishes, cups, and utensils in the familiar order Will had seen many times in the kitchen in Baltimore. Finished with his task, Hannibal folds the dishtowel once, twice, and then sets it beside the drain board before turning to face Will.

Hannibal beckons for Will to follow him back upstairs where the other boys are preparing for bed. Hannibal too readies for bed, exchanging his shirt and trousers for a long flannel nightshirt and leggings. Will sees bruises old and new along his back, neck, and shoulders.

Will doesn't have to wonder long where the bruises come from.

Before Hannibal can slip out the door to the bathroom at the end of the hall several of the boys surround him and begin to intimidate him with harsh tongues and pointed fingers. The taunts turn quickly to blows and it is only the sound of the headmaster's footsteps on the landing that cause them to scatter into their beds.

Hannibal stands stiff and silent by the door as the headmaster tells the boys lights out and closes the door. Will hears the key turn in the lock from the other side and notices that the windows have been secured shut. The boys are trapped in the room for the night.

Will sees that the bully session not only hurt and humiliated Hannibal but deprived him of the few minutes he had to use the bathroom for the night. Hannibal climbs stoically into bed, his face betraying nothing of the anguish or the anger he must certainly feel. Will continues to watch as Hannibal slides out of bed without a sound to retrieve a fountain pen from under his bed hidden between the floorboards.

Will watches, fascinated, as the young Hannibal removes his nightclothes and stands naked but apparently oblivious to the cold. He takes a breath and crosses the room, his feet moving sure and fast along the hardwood. He stands beside one of the beds.

Hannibal pulls back the blankets to the bottom of the mattress and climbs on top of the flaxen haired agitator of the group who had circled him earlier and deftly pushes the fountain pen into the ear of the sleeping boy, his carefully placed limbs and his weight keeping the boy still. The boy can only move his eyes as he awakens to searing pain.

But there is no sound. Hannibal's other hand covers the boy's throat, palm flat against his trachea and though the boy should be flailing uncontrollably with pain, he cannot. Within seconds it is over. The flaxen haired bully will bother Hannibal no more. Blood drips like ink from his ear as Hannibal pulls the fountain pen clear. The pen disappears into Hannibal's hand and he clenches it tightly before any blood can drip upon the blankets.

The smell of urine and fecal matter fills the room as Hannibal slips off the dead boy and climbs back into his own bed, but not before he licks pen and fingers clean and returns it to its cradle secreted in the floor. He carefully puts back on his clothes beneath his blankets. Hannibal turns his head to look at Will, his eyes dark but alive, so very alive as he stares into Will's eyes. A wisp of a smile graces the thin lips as his eyes close and Will closes his eyes, too.

Will's eyes flicker open. He is now leaning against the ashen haired man. Hannibal looks into his face with the tear stained cheeks flecked with blood and the rueful smile that burn in Will's memory. He lurches forward as the blade of the kitchen knife impales him. His arms find and grasp at the shoulders and arms that hold him in place and keep him from slipping to the slick floor in shock.

I wanted to surprise you. And you, wanted to surprise me…

The words echo in Will's mind. What surprise? Hannibal had known Jack was coming. Hannibal knew nothing of the snipers that never came, knew nothing of Purnell's interference. What surprise…?

I don't…don't understand…I t…told you they know… You…were s…supposed t…to leave.

Hannibal's arm contracts around him more tightly and he speaks softly into Will's ear; the blade that pierces him suspended between flesh and muscle. He feels the blood from the wound trickle down his skin as he bleeds into the fabric of his shirt, knows that as soon as Hannibal releases him, the trickle will become a tide.

Why did you come running Will?

To…to…

Will doesn't finish. Why didn't Hannibal listen? What does Hannibal think he knows to inflict such violence upon him with such cruel and pointed intimacy? To draw Will close into an embrace no different from any other embrace they shared. Except…except for the embedded knife and the handle concealed in Hannibal's fist.

You hurt me, Will.

How? How have I…hurt…you?

Patroclus never betrayed Achilles. Did you serve Jack to me Will? Did the Greeks believe we intended to leave for Troy without them? Is that what you meant for me to believe? That Jack was the Greek that had to die?

Yes. I had to…you knew that…

Did I? We could have left together after dinner…almost polite.

I know. Will shudders against him. It's becoming harder to breathe.

Hannibal's lips press to his ear, his nose caresses the soft damp curls as he cradles Will's head on his shoulder. Will smells his cologne mingling with the acrid tang of iron and sweat. Wishes he could stop thinking about this…returning here.

Whose armor did you wear? The smell of betrayal is thick upon it.

Betrayal? I came…running to stop, to save…to salvage…

Salvage what, Will? Only divine intervention could bring them down. Did you invite the divine?

Will feels Hannibal's nose again at his neck, his hand in his hair and Hannibal's chest swells against Will's savoring the intimacy of their words, their flesh, and the blade between them.

You…me. We're… just alike… The words tumble stilted, Will's tongue clicks dry against the roof of his mouth.

Yes. This gives you the capacity to deceive me and be deceived by me. Hannibal says stroking his head as he had done so many times before...this.

This isn't sustainable…

Jack already suspects you killed Freddie Lounds.

If J…Jack t…told you he s…suspects me, that, that means he s…suspects you…

You thought you could deceive me? Hubris, Will. Divine intervention. Poetic if not for the irony…

Will slips from the embrace, with that peculiar feeling of falling that precipitates waking... not on the sullied and defiled floor but into a bed. He starts from the bed completely disoriented. It is Hannibal's face looming over him as sunlight touches the familiar blue walls that grounds Will to the moment. He is in Baltimore, in the bed he has slept in so many times…which time is this?

Hannibal?

Hannibal's brow creases slightly as he brushes the disheveled curls from Will's forehead. Will is naked beneath the blankets and knows without looking that so is Hannibal. Will wonders what day it is and how long he has been here. Did he feed the dogs?

You're trembling. Bad dreams, Will?

I…I'm not sure.

You're not sure if the dreams were bad?"

Hannibal eases closer, the blankets fall from his shoulders as his hand touches Will's face. Will closes his eyes as Hannibal's fingers caress his brow and then cheek.

I'm not sure I was dreaming…am dreaming. I must be dreaming still…

You haven't had the bad dreams since you started sleeping here.

When did I…how long have I been sleeping…here?

Will opens his eyes and sinks back into the pillow causing Hannibal's hand to fall away.

Will…you have been waking up to who you are… dreams prepare us for our waking life. The dread you associate with sleep does not follow you here.

You saw to that, too, didn't you? When I was sick…

Will stares at the perfectly manicured nails resting on his pillow and remembers the tube down his throat, the syringes under his skin. He feels Hannibal's fingers curling around the hair behind his ear.

You are aware now. The therapy we resumed does not extend to your dreams. You make those associations on your own.

Will looks into his eyes, searches for deceit and finds none. He nods slowly accepting Hannibal's explanation and immediately reads the approval in Hannibal's eyes. He's not sure how he feels about that.

Tell me about your dreams.

You cut me, here… Will shoves down the blankets so he can see his stomach. He stares at skin as pale and smooth and unscarred as he remembers. He moves his hand along the skin under his navel. Hannibal's eyes sweep over him to rest at his abdomen.

Why did I cut you?

You thought I betrayed you, but I didn't, I...didn't get to explain.

What did you do to make me think that?

I called to warn you so you would run. Leave. But you didn't. You waited for me…with Abigail. You waited to…to wound me, to leave me…and Abigail to bleed on the floor.

Hannibal traces his fingers along Will's torso until his hand rests below his navel and his fingers curl around Will's. He lifts his eyes slowly to meet Will's as his fingers unwind to caress the flesh where the wound would be, should be.

Then, it was not the call that caused me to wound you, Will. We are alone with each other. Why would I cut you from me?

I don't know what you believed. But you believed me up to a point, or I couldn't have surprised you. What did you mean?

Did you lie to me? Did I catch you in a lie?

There were plenty of lies. Jack wanted to trap you. I was the lure.

Hannibal's mouth curves up, he tilts his head to one side. *Of course you were. Uncle Jack keeps his broken pony close. So you helped Jack trap me while you resumed your therapy with me?*

I had to deal with you and my feelings about you.

Did you deal with your feelings, Will?

Hannibal's hands move over Will's body until his fingers find his hair once again. He stares into Will's face as Will looks up at him from the pillow that smells of sandalwood, cologne, and musky sweat from the night before.

I was angry. I wanted to kill you. For what you did to me. For all the other things…

I remember. But you have other feelings and you have to deal with them as well.

Will is silent.

Stubborn to the last. Hannibal lifts his head from the pillow to rest in his hand as he gazes at Will. *You didn't want to kill me that night.*

No. Not that night…the circumstances were all wrong.

You wanted me to leave, without you.

Will closes his eyes. Hannibal's fantasy was unsustainable. And yet, honesty finds its way to Will's lips.

I would have found you.

Hannibal's eyes soften, he rewards Will with a gentle tug of his hair.

Not if I believed you tried to deceive me.

You waited for Jack to come to dinner. But, he shouldn't have come. The trap fell apart. You fought with him. And…and Alana…

Will stops unwilling to bring Alana into it.

You believed I was Jack's and I can't figure out…. I had been so careful not to arouse suspicion. Even Jack doubted me because he went to you alone…

You wanted Jack to come to dinner. You sent him to me so that you would not have to choose. Let Fate decide. Is that what you did, Will?

Will does not answer. He stares into Hannibal's dark eyes, *What caused you to doubt me?*

What would arouse my suspicion, Will? What lie did you tell to cause your plan to fall apart?

You couldn't have known. That's what I don't understand.

Known what?

That I did not kill Freddie Lounds.

You let me believe you killed her. Who did we eat that night at dinner?

Tier.

Ah, that explains the fear, the adrenaline in the meat.

But you couldn't have known. Not then… Did you lie to me? Did we dine on that last supper lying to each other? Did you know all along and wait for the perfect moment to deliver my punishment?

You cast yourself into the Inferno, Will. I wanted to believe you. I didn't cut you because of Jack, or the FBI. I cut you because you lied to me. And you are angry because you do not know when or how I found the lie. You are very, very angry Will.

But you knew Jack was in on it. No charges filed for Tier. No charges for Mason. Even if you knew about Lounds, you should have known I had no choice…

How could I know? You told me you killed her, let me believe. Believe that you were mine. Somehow I learned she was alive. When did I learn, Will?

I made a mistake. Somewhere I made a mistake… But so did you, Hannibal.

What was my mistake?

You didn't trust me. You never let me explain. You took Abigail away from me, again.

Hubris, Will. We are both guilty of the same offense.

Hannibal pulls Will close so that his head rests upon Will's shoulder in perhaps the closest to a gesture of contrition as Will had ever seen from him. Will arches up from the bed so his body meets the curve of Hannibal's. To feel the weight of him, warm and solid and real once more.

A life without regret… Hannibal says his words lost in the crush of Will's mouth against his.

Will's fingers relax against the sheet as he slowly opens his eyes. He is in Daniel's room. Cara lies at the foot of the bed snuggled against Daniel's leg. Will shakes his head in dismay. He must have walked in here at some point, but when? The uncomfortably erect cock between his legs is a more immediate concern, however.

Will looks over at Daniel to find him also clenching the sheets, his breathing quick and shallow. The tent in his boxers leaves no doubt as to the reason for his fitful slumber. Daniel cannot help but empathize with Will; his dreams and his body a reflection of Will's emotions, the perfect mirror. Will slips off his boxers and tee.

Cara slides off the bed to lie on the floor. Will can barely see her.

Daniel feels the press of warm fingers across his belly, feels the tickle of stubble and moist breath along his thigh. He wakes with a jolt to find a naked Will sitting beside him, a welcome sight to be sure, and reassuring since it had been Cara and not Will he had last seen at his feet. He glances at his hands and disentangles his fingers from the twisted cotton slowly, sucks in a breath as Will tugs at his boxers.

"Who were you dreaming about?" Will says relieving the stunned Daniel of his boxers. The touch of Will's fingers along his stiff cock draws the softest of hisses from Daniel.

"You." Daniel murmurs. He feels heat rise in his cheeks and it spreads like fire until his entire body is enflamed with a powerful longing. Daniel recognizes the heat is not his alone.

"Who were you dreaming about?" Daniel says noticing Will in a similar state.

A pause, “Hannibal.” comes the quiet reply.

Daniel sighs, “I’m seeing a pattern here…”

Daniel sits up and wriggles out of his tee. Will pushes him back onto the mattress, nudges his legs apart licking his fingers as he does. Daniel’s eyes widen as Will’s intentions become plain to him. His own dream had played out a little differently.

“Is this what you dreamed?” Will asks, his little smirk indicating he knows better. Daniel’s muscles contract around Will’s finger as it slips inside him.

“Um, not exactly…you?”

“Uh no.” Will says as he curls his finger causing Daniel to groan and wriggle along the mattress. Daniel smiles up at him. Of course Will wants to top after dreaming about Hannibal.

Will smiles back. The lop-sided grin and the tangled curls cause Daniel to fairly melt inside. *Damn him…*

“Drawer…” Daniel says pointing to the night stand.

The cool gel tingles on his skin as Will pushes his fingers inside the soft pucker of flesh. The flexing of muscle is accompanied by a luscious mounting pressure. Daniel relaxes against Will’s fingers, thinks how oddly contemplative Will appears as he kneels upon the bed gazing down at him.

The scar from Will’s wound shimmers, a ghostly silver line across his stomach in the dim light and Daniel is struck by Will’s contradictory nature – to feel such arousal and desire for the one who had caused him so much pain. Daniel finds himself wishing that Will could think only of him, to be in this moment with just him, but he knows Will cannot. The specter of Lecter looms large in Will’s mind and imagination, too large a shadow to ever disappear completely.

“Enough?” Will asks after a few moments of dedicated probing. Daniel tenses to the touch of fingers circling and sliding wet between his legs.

“I’m good.”

The anticipation is almost painful as he watches Will slick up his own cock.

The entry, when it comes, is slow and sweet as Will takes him in long strokes that lift Daniel from the mattress each time. Daniel struggles against the painful burn that he knows will lessen, eventually sending the familiar waves of pleasure through him. Will feels the resistance give way as he penetrates further, listening to Daniel’s breathing quicken as he moves inside him.

Daniel writhes beneath Will trying to coordinate his movements with Will’s but there is a lot of sensory overload. Will’s emotional response to the fucking combines with his own and it is almost too much. He feels around the bed until he finds the sheet and tightly twists the fabric taut around his fingers. He wraps his legs around Will’s body, lifting his hips from the bed as he does and he hears Will’s sighs of contentment as he adjusts his position to Daniel’s thoughtful modification.

Will angles his hips and feels the difference immediately. He rocks his body rhythmically in measured teasing strokes.

Daniel's composure becomes unraveled under the constant assault. The widening of the tender skin hurts and delights simultaneously. His cock begins to throb uncomfortably, a wonderfully wicked uncomfortable. Daniel thinks he might explode he can hardly contain the pleasure ripping through him. He flushes hot all over. He doesn't even try to stifle the cries and groans that slip from his lips as Will drills into him more deeply with every thrust of his body.

"Oh fuck… Will, this feels…"

"I…know…"

Will begins to press more eagerly, his shoulders and arms bearing his weight as he leans over Daniel. Daniel's head is thrown back, his jaw slack every belabored breath a whimper. Will thinks he looks exquisite. Daniel feels tight and slick around Will's cock as he slides the length back and forth. His body swallows Will up perfectly like a slippery glazed glove. He pushes in more deeply now, and feels the hesitation from Daniel. He can feel his own abdomen tighten, a sympathetic response as he invariably creates an image of himself in the same position.

"Do you want to turn over?" Will says slowing his movements so that Daniel stops bouncing between the mattress and Will.

Daniel appreciates the brief respite. "You're almost there, right?" grunts Daniel.

"As close as you are." Will glances at Daniel's swollen cock, feels the wet slick of the tip graze his skin. The sensation sends a pleasing tremor throughout his body.

"Aw, fuck…" Daniel trembles too, "This connection…" he hisses, flinching at the contact. He doesn't finish his thought.

Every muscle, every nerve jumps in response to the searing of his flesh as Will inserts the remaining length he's been holding back, widening Daniel so he whines in surprise. Will grins, knowing well what he just did to Daniel and how tantalizingly sweet that little jab was.

The grin becomes grimace, Will's face a mask of concentration focused on the impending release. His head is spinning in delirious anticipation of the blissful rush that awaits. As the throbbing intensifies, Will's entire body quivers and tenses. He looks to see Daniel's eyes are large and bright as his body twitches in response to Will.

"I'm feeling… really…...connected to you…right now." Will mumbles through gritted teeth. He lets loose his restraint and pummels Daniel into the mattress, feeling Daniel's legs still wrapped snugly around his body, heels grinding uncomfortably into his ribs.

"Ah…fuck!" A loud sob rips from Will as he shudders helplessly, nerves tingling with shocks of electric heat. Will thinks he can actually see the flares of synapses and feel the pop of neurons as they fire off in his head.

The emotional overload is mind numbing, Daniel cannot think; he only feels. He feels Will go achingly rigid inside him, feels the eruption when Will cums and trembles with uncontrollable spasms from his own release seconds later. Will is trembling himself, his arms bent with fatigue and glistening with sweat.

Daniel is slick with perspiration as well, the sheet damp beneath him. When did it get so hot in here?

Will relaxes and lowers himself down to rest on Daniel as Daniel's legs slide off him a little shakily. He immediately feels Daniel's fingers in his hair tugging him close. Daniel pulls Will's head down so that their lips touch. He opens his mouth and feels Will's mouth cover his.

Exchanging spit is so much better than exchanging words thinks Daniel. The kisses say more than the usual tired platitudes that seem inadequate, incapable of expressing the intensity of feeling between them.

Will is grateful for the silence. His mind is still recovering from the onslaught of emotion just now. He decides he will tell Daniel about his dreams and his sleep walking in the morning. For now, he can allow himself the stolen pleasure of Daniel's quiet company.

Daniel thinks he would really like to know the source of Will's inspiration beyond the one word answer he had offered. Perhaps he can get Will to talk about his dreams before they call Chilton. While Will is still in a reasonably good mood.

Daniel presses his lips to Will's forehead and turns over. He waits for Will to settle in and grins when he feels Will at his back, feels the now familiar press of his forehead between his shoulder blades.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 43

Chilton is caught between a colleague and his former favorite intelligent psychopath. Hannibal has his first appointment with Daniel.

Sorry for just one chapter. Had holiday obligations to attend to. I will post more next weekend. Merry Christmas!

Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Chilton is caught between a colleague and one of his favorite intelligent psychopaths.

“You know Will, my initial assessment of you was more accurate than anyone knew.” Chilton says from behind his polished desk where he obviously feels safe enough to continue throwing darts. “In fact, in the aftermath of what happened after your release from this hospital the first time, I am quite certain that you are just as dangerous as Lecter.”

Daniel raises his head at that remark. He knew this was a bad idea for Will to talk to Chilton.

“Oh? Please enlighten me. I’d love to hear your professional opinion.” Will says while Daniel shakes his head at Chilton, begging with his eyes for Chilton to keep his mouth shut.

BSHCI

Chapter 43

Chilton is caught between a colleague and one of his favorite intelligent psychopaths.

Will awakens to weight on his feet. He shifts around on the bed and finally has to wrest his legs from under Cara who straddles both his feet and Daniel’s at the bottom of the bed. She had apparently reclaimed her space once the humans were finished messing it up. Cara steps daintily over Daniel to lie at his side. Will watches her through eyes still bleary with sleep. She turns three times on the mattress before settling down.

Will remembers Winston doing the same thing. Always three times as if he could count or had some form of canine obsessive compulsive disorder.

Will feels good this morning all things considered. He doesn’t remember what he dreamed about, if he even dreamed at all after he fell asleep. The dreams of Hannibal trouble him and he pushes the sheet down. The scar is there. He breathes realizing he was holding his breath just then.

He remembers their agenda today. He taps Daniel in the back, between his shoulder blades where Will’s head had spent the remainder of the night.

“Get up. We’ve got to call to Chilton.” Will pushes hair from his eyes and waits for a response as Daniel hugs his pillow more tightly. Will taps him again.

Daniel lifts his head and turns to his stomach, pushing his upper body off the bed. Will thinks he’s stretching for a moment and then realizes Daniel is trying to see the clock on the dresser.

“It’s quarter to six. What is wrong with you?” Daniel flops back down on the bed. “Go back to sleep…”

Daniel scoots away from Will and curls around Cara to run his fingers through her fur. She licks his fingers and he murmurs he loves her too as she thumps her tail in answer.

Will grins at the affectionate exchange and feels the tug at his own heart, his mind filled with memories of his dogs. Memories of snatches of happiness, stolen minutes too brief to hold on to, and for Will it seems, the happier memories often are. He pushes the sheets off and frowns.

“I’m all sticky…gonna get a shower.” Will says as he climbs out of bed.

After listening to Will fumble around in the bathroom followed by the sound of water running through the pipes, Daniel gives up trying to fall back asleep. He sits up and cradles Cara’s jaw in his hands.

“Let’s go make some coffee.” He says to enthusiastic tail thumping. Cara knows coffee means a run outside and breakfast. Daniel begins to pull on some clothes. He glances at the bed and figures he will be doing more laundry today.

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Will plays with his coffee cup as his gaze shifts from the vista of Florence below them to Daniel who sits at the table with him on the patio with his notepad, pen, and open laptop. The sky is overcast today but the humidity prevails. The patio feels cooler than the house this morning and this is why they sit outside. It’s only a little after eight and the promise of a summer rain looms overhead. However, it is Daniel’s impending conversation that commands his sole attention this morning.

He had agreed with Daniel that remaining off camera was a good suggestion. He did not promise he would. Will thinks he may have to remind Daniel of that distinction later.

Daniel also sits in a tee and a pair of cut off sweatpants swilling his coffee around the mug. This is the second pot of coffee he has made; the amount of coffee Will can drink is staggering. Breakfast was far too brief and he just wants to get what is sure to be a huge pile of unpleasantness out of the way before it rains. It would seem the mood is not any brighter in Baltimore.

“You look…well.” Daniel says with as much sincerity as he can muster.

Daniel smiles at the image on his laptop screen. The reconstructive surgery is first rate. There is scarring, but considering the hole left from the bullet and the ruined bone beneath, Frederick Chilton could look a lot worse. The scar actually gives his otherwise snooty expression some character.

But then, of course, he speaks.

“This is highly, highly irregular, Doctor Clayton.” Chilton leans into the lens of the web camera and squints as though Daniel might actually be inside his laptop.

“Highly irregular, highly confidential.” Daniel continues to smile. Chilton isn’t fooling anyone. He thrives on irregular. As soon as he had seen Daniel’s face on his screen, he had known exactly who

Daniel was calling about. There are probably damp stains on his sleeve from wiping the saliva from his mouth.

“All he needs is an eye patch…” Will mumbles from his chair.

“What was that?” Chilton asks still squinting.

Daniel rolls his eyes. Will had said he would remain quiet and off camera unless it became necessary for him to interrupt. Daniel thinks a moment. He sighs. Will had not actually *said* anything.

“What was what?” Daniel asks with a straight face.

“Nothing, I suppose. How did you say you came by my IP address?” Chilton fusses with his cuffs and angles his head as he gives Daniel the once over, no doubt assessing his casual attire.

“I didn’t…” Daniel says leaning back a little in his swivel chair so that Chilton can more easily see his tie-dye tee.

“This is something Jack Crawford would do…”

“Agent Crawford has nothing to do with this. I would like to keep it that way. I am aware *our patient* enjoys a certain celebrity and your discretion is appreciated.”

“Well, of course…How is Will?”

Daniel takes a slow deep breath. So much for discretion. “*Our patient* is managing for now.”

“I would be very interested to know what sort of therapy…” Chilton pauses suddenly, “Where are you right now? Are you outside?”

“Yes, in Florence. With *our patient*.”

“Uh huh. Still in Florence? Neither the hunt nor the therapy going well I assume. Does he remember leaving the hospital or…”

“There is enough progress to be encouraged by it. I need some information on his drug history at BSHCI while under your exclusive care.”

Chilton sits quietly for a moment. Daniel watches him purse his lips, another inappropriate question on the tip of his tongue. Daniel sighs with relief as Chilton swallows whatever it was. He’s not worried that Will might lose his temper. Chilton barely registers on Will’s radar of emotion. What Will loves is slapping Chilton’s ego around. In that, he is a lot like Hannibal Lecter. In fact, Will is like a lot of people in that regard, himself included.

Daniel knows Will sits stone faced in his chair. Will’s feelings about Chilton are few and they vacillate between pity and contempt. He suspects the latter is more in evidence today.

Will knows Frederick will be less than forthcoming. He also knows he will nose around like a dog sniffing for truffles. Will is actually looking forward to seeing how Daniel handles him. Although, there’s not much challenge in checkers.

“I suppose you would be referring to his narcoanalytic interview?” Chilton says casually, betraying his anxiety about that very thing.

Will thinks for a psychiatrist, Chilton is woefully unaware of how easy he is to read.

“I would.” Daniel says, “And any other drug therapy administered to him.”

“Will…*our patient*,” Chilton taps a finger to his temple and tries to smile but only one side of his mouth curves upward. It is an arresting sight and the slight tic in Chilton’s eye signals to Daniel that Chilton often forgets one side of his face doesn’t move anymore.

“The patient,” Chilton continues, “knows what drugs were administered to him.”

“He knows what you told him.”

“I’m sure he told you he signed consent forms.”

“He knows what he signed off on. This is not about consent, unless you bring it up for a reason. Is there a reason?”

“What are you implying? I don’t think I like your tone, doctor. You always did have a habit of being a little snide.”

“Just a little? Well, I didn’t mean to imply anything. I’ll speak plainly then. Without looking at his file, relate to me what drugs you gave him and the intended therapeutic reasons for administering them.”

“Are you sure Jack Crawford, or that Purnell woman didn’t put you up to this?”

Daniel hears Will shift in his seat. He does not dare look at him. Will is likely to take that as his cue to start in on Chilton.

“Doctor Chilton. I need the information to effectively treat *my* patient, who is now under *my* exclusive care. You understand the use of the plural possessive was merely polite?”

Chilton blinks, and then leans back in his chair, clicks his pen a few times.

“No need to get in a pissing contest.”

“No, there isn’t. I already won.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be amazed at all the attention Mr. Graham gets. He is the belle of the ball, isn’t he?”

“Doctor Chilton…”

“He already signed off on consent.”

“Yes, you keep saying that like it means something. The paperwork says you gave him sodium amytal.”

“Yes…to ensure an honest exchange.”

Daniel can almost feel Will flinch at the words. Hearing the word honest fall from Chilton's mouth rankles at him, too.

"Neither sodium amytal nor pentothal guarantees that. There is no such thing as a truth serum." Daniel says.

"No, but that's what we use. Standard procedure."

"Alright then, were your questions standard, too?"

"What do you mean?"

"You had been talking to Doctor Lecter about him. You listened in on their conversations when Lecter visited. Weren't you curious what he might remember? He was arrested on several counts of murder that he claimed no memory of."

Daniel had hoped Chilton would be more cooperative. He did not want to have to go this route, but Chilton's obduracy requires Daniel engage in just the sort of confrontation he wanted to avoid. He would much rather catch the fly with honey, but now he'll have to swat the fly instead.

"Of course *he* wanted to remember, but the *interview* was intended as a baseline, an initial assessment with other interviews to follow. He understood the purpose, agreed to take any test I wanted. You understand the procedures as well as I."

"At least as well. So you were looking for inconsistencies in his mental processing? To determine if he was delusional or lying."

"Yes…"

"Let me tell you what I think you were looking for. Tell me if I'm getting warm. You were looking for proof of psychic driving, so you could have something on Lecter - to counter the allegations against you doing the same to Abel Gideon."

Will looks at Daniel. He had no idea Daniel thought that. The thought had crossed his mind and Will is impressed he didn't even have to mention it to Daniel.

You discussed my therapy with Hannibal Lecter, Frederick. Counter to our agreement.

I gave him a peek before I snatched down the shades.

I have appearances to maintain.

Chilton shrugs and rolls his eyes. He has the temerity to appear…bored.

"Those allegations are a bit of a non sequitur aren't they? Gideon is dead and Lecter is…well what he did to Graham is the least of his worries. Left Graham effectively neutered and broken on his kitchen floor as I understand it…"

Daniel keeps his jaw loose but it is a struggle to do so with Will sitting nearby. Daniel cannot even begin to characterize the emotions likely twisting over Will's face, but he feels them and Chilton should be very glad he sits miles away. Daniel is also dismayed by the lack of compassion from Chilton as he speaks of Will. It occurs to Daniel that Chilton doesn't actually see his psychotic patients as human beings, but something else, something less. And this extends even to Will.

Will understands Frederick. He understands his snobbery and self-importance as attempts to camouflage his failures and inadequacies. He coats his words with poison hoping people don't look too closely to find the emperor has no clothes. But who did Frederick turn to when Hannibal left him to wake from unconsciousness with the blood of two FBI agents all over him and his house?

May I use your shower please?

"My point is – if you suspected Lecter of psychic driving, your questions might have reflected that. You said you gave him the amytal to lower his inhibitions but he found buried memories instead. That not only suggests a certain battery of guided questions, but the introduction of other drugs as well. So…were you seeking proof of psychic driving when you administered the interview?"

"And what if I was? This is beyond the scope of asking about medication, Doctor Clayton. I think you are a little out of your league."

"Depends on which league you are talking about. I…do not play in *yours*."

"Oh, really? Well what have you prescribed for him?"

"Nothing." Daniel says after a pause. He shouldn't give Chilton that much, but he wants to let Chilton know that he has been interacting with a sober and drug free Will.

Chilton sits up straight in his chair and leans in to the laptop. "Are you telling me that he is not being treated with any medication?"

"Doctor Chilton, I can't talk to you about his current treatment. You know that."

"You are as crazy as he is. How about sedatives? I suppose you let him just walk around… Florence… Jack Crawford must be out of his mind…"

"Doctor Chilton!" Daniel interrupts him. He either did not hear Daniel or he cannot help but vent his disbelief and disapproval.

"Not even anti-depressants? Let's be honest, he is one clinically depressed individual. And depression is only the most mild of his afflictions. How do you manage him? We all know the state he was in…"

"Doctor Chilton, be careful what you say next…"

"Just tell him what you did to me, Frederick." Will says, leaning into the frame.

Daniel bites his lip. He can feel the downward spiral and all he wants is to land on his feet. This can't end well.

Chilton teeters in his chair as he moves backward a little. He composes himself quickly.

"Mr. Graham…" Chilton shifts his gaze to Daniel and his eyes narrow to slits. "You might have mentioned he was there. No one likes an ambush."

"People who tell the truth don't get ambushed." Will says as he pulls up his chair to rest beside Daniel's.

Chilton rubs his fingers over his lips as he eyes Daniel and Will carefully. Will can't help but stare at the scar that runs from cheekbone to lip. Will thinks how the injury has seemed to reinforce the very qualities that got him shot in the first place. Chilton likely sees himself as a victim and Will supposes he is. A victim of his own shortsightedness.

"Well, Mr. Graham, Will…you're a lot more lucid than the last time I saw you."

"Whatever that means." Will says. "And you are typically obstinate. At least you never disappoint."

Chilton swivels in his chair so his good side faces his laptop. He engages the screen in profile with sidelong glances.

"I would imagine disappointment is an emotion you are intimately acquainted with. Well, you look healthy enough. The uh, climate where you are seems to agree with you. My compliments, Doctor Clayton."

Daniel resists offering a tart response. He's empathizing with Will yet again. Will has an entire quiver full of arrows, his bow aimed at Chilton.

"You were curious about what he would remember under the influence. A rare opportunity to study a psychopath in action. And he was cooperating because he believed that you told him the truth about what you were drugging him with." Daniel says.

Chilton folds his hands together and smiles a most ingratiating smile from across his desk.

"He was cooperating to manipulate Lecter. My this for his that. Threatening me with a malpractice suit?"

"I'm afraid that would become a class action suit, Frederick and I don't have the time. I asked you what you thought Lecter had given me to induce memory loss. You rattled off a list, but then you gave me one, or a cocktail, to induce the same thing. Didn't you?"

"Why would I do that?" Chilton says in his predictably squirrely manner.

"Because studies have shown that the memory of an event experienced under the influence of drugs or alcohol is more likely to be recalled under the influence of the same substance. Even better if you could get him into the same emotional state." Daniel says.

"You flashed some lights on me, too, didn't you Frederick?" Will says.

"Well, I did give you sodium amytal." Chilton says looking at his fingernails as though contemplating a manicure.

"And…" Will prompts.

"And a couple of benzodiazepines." Chilton says quickly, the words clipped and short.

"To dampen the transfer of short term to long term memory. So Will would remember the past, but not the interview. Pretty slick, doctor. Which ones did you give him?" Daniel says.

"Diazepam and Midazolam." Chilton bites his lip looking like the kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar. Daniel wonders if he can feel his own teeth scraping on that side of his lip.

Sedatives. The strobe causes neurons to fire en masse like striking many piano keys at once. The dissonance might foster a change in your mind…

“You think that’s what Lecter used?” Will asks.

“To induce the memory loss? Yes, old chestnuts those. To induce seizures? Combined with the strategic light stimulation, absolutely. Of course, it’s only conjecture. Lecter had the means to get his hands on anything…and he apparently did.”

Will ignores the insinuating raise of Chilton’s brow. Frederick will give up more information if Will lets him hurl a little innuendo. Frederick’s own narcissism had been constantly undermined by Hannibal’s. Eclipsed would be more accurate. Throwing darts at Will makes him feel better about himself.

Daniel realizes Will was taking the diazepam when he met him not for generalized anxiety as he claimed, but to recreate the lost time and possibly the seizures so he could recall those lost memories. But the dosage wasn’t high enough and he knew he couldn’t take more without supervision. Enter Daniel. This is why he’s been so concerned about having flashes and hallucinations without the pharmaceutical inducement. It is entirely possible he has built up a tolerance to it, or…Daniel considers the possibility that Will’s mind is trying to repair itself. It has rewired the pathways away from certain memories to protect him while it does.

Daniel is surprised Will complied with his therapy. Will had abandoned his own self-therapy because... Trust. Will trusts him. Trusts him enough to let him call the shots. Respects him enough to follow his instructions. He glances at Will who meets his eyes and responds by looking up at the sky and then shifts his gaze to the waiting Chilton.

“Frederick, we don’t have to particularly like each other to help each other.” Will says.

“No, we don’t. Though I don’t know how you can help me except to an early grave. How may I be of further assistance?”

“Is there anything else I should know about my stay at BSHCI?”

“Well, if it helps with whatever you two are doing, you should be able to remember anything you experience during a seizure, including the one you had during our interview, but you may never recall anything you experienced during the dangerously high fevers you had with the encephalitis.”

Will knows Chilton is being truthful on this point. He can remember the exchange in Hannibal’s dining room when he had his seizure in front of Gideon, but barely an hour later, remembered nothing of shooting Gideon. Chilton can be inept about his craft, but he knows the brain and he knows what drugs can do to a brain.

“And, it was Gideon who gave you up to Bloom. Too bad. Brown might have succeeded.”

“I figured as much.” Will says. If Alana had not wanted to save him so badly…

“If I were you, I would be more concerned about dealing with the trauma of Hannibal’s attack than chasing ghosts and flashing lights. Your mind is fractured, Will. Lecter broke you into little pieces and you think Clayton here is going to pick up the pieces.”

"If you wanted Lecter caught so badly, Frederick, why did you stay in the shadows? Why not come forward and lay it all out to Jack? Before Miriam shot you." Will asks.

"Because Lecter was running around free. And if by some chance you had actually managed to bring him in, I wanted to be the one in charge of his treatment. I couldn't do that if I lost my license. If I could dine out for years on the mind of Will Graham, imagine what Lecter's mind will bring in."

I would love nothing more than to see you trade places with Doctor Lecter.

Will thinks killing Hannibal outright would be more merciful. The thought that Hannibal's mind would be in Chilton's hands sinks like a stone in his gut. Chilton would not be interested in rehabilitating him. He would hurt him, torture him, and pick at his brain sadistically and with carte blanche from the FBI. Chilton would have his revenge on Hannibal in the most legal way imaginable.

Chilton would actually make Hannibal more dangerous than he already was. Hannibal may be psychopathic killer and cannibal but he was also flesh and blood. The words of Shakespeare's Shylock come to Will's mind.

If you prick us…do we not bleed? *And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?*

It occurs to Will that there is a profound difference between Chilton's and Hannibal's approach to therapy. As crazy as it is, Hannibal's therapy had been intended to help, at least to Hannibal's thinking. Chilton's therapy had been malicious and self-serving. It had been that way with Abel Gideon and with Will. Will finds Chilton's actions more egregious than even Hannibal's.

Chilton intends to put Hannibal through hell.

"You know Will, my initial assessment of you was more accurate than anyone knew." Chilton says from behind his polished desk where he obviously feels safe enough to continue throwing darts. "In fact, in the aftermath of what happened after your release from this hospital the first time, I am quite certain that you are just as dangerous as Lecter."

Daniel raises his head at that remark. He knew this was a bad idea for Will to talk to Chilton.

"Oh? Please enlighten me. I'd *love* to hear your professional opinion." Will says while Daniel shakes his head at Chilton, begging with his eyes for Chilton to keep his mouth shut.

"Ah yes, that debatable charm of yours. You know I always believed all those disorders and neuroses you claim are forgeries. You are ever the psychopath's triumvirate wrapped in a pretty package. I've had numerous chats with Jack Crawford. At least with Lecter, we know what we are getting."

I'm going to prove Hannibal Lecter is the Chesapeake Ripper.

"You…didn't trap Lecter, you abetted his escape and he thanked you for that by gutting you."

I know you will. And when you do, I will read about it from a secure location and I will reintroduce myself to society at that time.

"You turned me over to the FBI knowing I was innocent and that poor disturbed student of Crawford's fired a bullet into my face."

Will, what have you done?

I called Jack Crawford.

No.

None of us is innocent, Frederick, not anymore. Will nods his head, his face serene almost saint like as Chilton blithely ignores his own diagnosis of Will at his own peril. Chilton's survival instinct must have departed as he sits feeling secure behind the lens of the laptop.

Light flashes overhead and Will thinks for a moment they are about to be caught in a downpour of summer rain, but the thunder does not follow. There is no crack from the ominous clouds in the sky above them. Daniel sits beside him listening to Chilton prattle on… There is another flash of light and Will is someplace else…

"Whatever Lecter did to you before you arrived at BSHCI released a psychopath if you weren't one already. And Jack Crawford should have known you never returned to therapy with Lecter to catch him. You found your soulmate."

Will says nothing but Daniel can see his mind at work processing behind the pale blue eyes, staring at the laptop screen but not really seeing it, or Chilton.

"You're dangerous because people respond to that boy next door face of yours far more easily than any approximation of charm Hannibal puts out there. We can call him Hannibal, can't we? I'm assuming you were on a first name basis."

"Doctor Chilton, if you have nothing helpful to add…" Daniel says but Chilton keeps talking right over him.

"When you're done with your therapy Will, are you going to bring Hannibal in? I doubt it. You'll likely end up right back here. Whoever finds Hannibal will either kill him as you should have done, or extradite him right back here. And with any luck, maybe I'll have the both of you right where you belong. You could be cellmates. We'd have some fun then."

"That was really helpful, Chilton." Daniel says, "Will, we're done here."

"Doctor Clayton, while I take exception to your approach with Will, I admire the other work you do and you should stick to grief therapy and your dogs. Will's madness is a fire. You are playing with fire and you are likely to get burnt. He has you wrapped around his finger or something close, and you believe everything he says."

"Don't hold back Frederick, you're on a roll." Will says, eyes blinking furiously as he returns to… here.

Odd he heard every word exchanged, but he wasn't sitting on the patio. His surroundings had shifted then shifted back. He had been inside a room with pale pink rosebuds on the wallpaper and a pine tree outside the window. There had been a photograph. The image fades from his conscious mind, too distracted by the conversation to keep it.

Chilton wants them both locked up. Hannibal and Will together in adjoining cells in Chilton's little shop of horrors. Will thinks Hannibal would be amused at the thought. Will can picture his lips upturned in a satisfied smile as he carves up Chilton into steaks and drinks a toast to his health.

"To answer your question about the drugs, Doctor Clayton…I gave Will what I just said I did. Nothing else. I did not conduct multiple interviews with him as I had hoped because Hannibal set him free. Unfortunately for Hannibal, he won't be set free and I will be able to treat him…as I see fit."

Who will be playing god then, Frederick?

"He's smarter than you, Frederick. He managed to frame you *and* get you shot."

"He's smarter than you, too. He managed to seduce perhaps the only person alive capable of catching him."

Will's eyes widen. Daniel feels the turmoil inside Will as the conversation runs around his brain like a high speed train off its rails. The aching Daniel feels in his chest is mirrored in the pained expression on Will's face as Chilton keeps right on talking to one of the two intelligent psychopaths he wants committed to his hospital.

"I should have seen it. Locked up in your cell, whining to anyone who would listen about your innocence, you were always going on about Hannibal this and Hannibal that, and Hannibal - wringing his hands over Will, Will, Will…

Daniel reaches over and clicks off the camera and the image of Chilton winks out. Will stares at Daniel's desktop, a replica of the beach print in his office. He smells the ocean as he turns to look at Daniel.

"That's the reason I wanted to contact him without you. That…was ugly."

"It was, but Chilton is no slacker when it comes to hindsight. I can see why he thinks the way he does. And if he thinks that way, so do a lot of other people." Will says thinking of Jack.

"They can't get in your head either. Your actions are being viewed like a silent movie reel. What happened is a lot more complicated, more complicated than someone like Chilton could appreciate."

"Hmmmm. He does lack imagination, doesn't he?" Will says still thinking about his own imagination. How broken is he?

"He lacks a soul." Daniel says. "You want to shake this off and go get some clothes? I think I'm tired of seeing you wearing my stuff."

"Where are we going?"

"Downtown Florence. We should get there about the time the shops open. Check out block after block of fine Italian clothiers. Quite a different experience than shopping in a mall in the states."

"You know, I have bought clothes at places other than a mall."

"Not in Italy." Daniel smiles. "I do have one question, Will."

“Just one?’

“Yeah. Did Jack ever tell you that Chilton was alive?”

Will shakes his head slowly. Jack had kept that ace up his sleeve. Will had learned about Chilton later, after surgery, after leaving the hospital. Hannibal probably knows Chilton survived. Chilton’s return to his former position had been as sensational as his demise. Will sighs at the thought of yet another perceived betrayal.

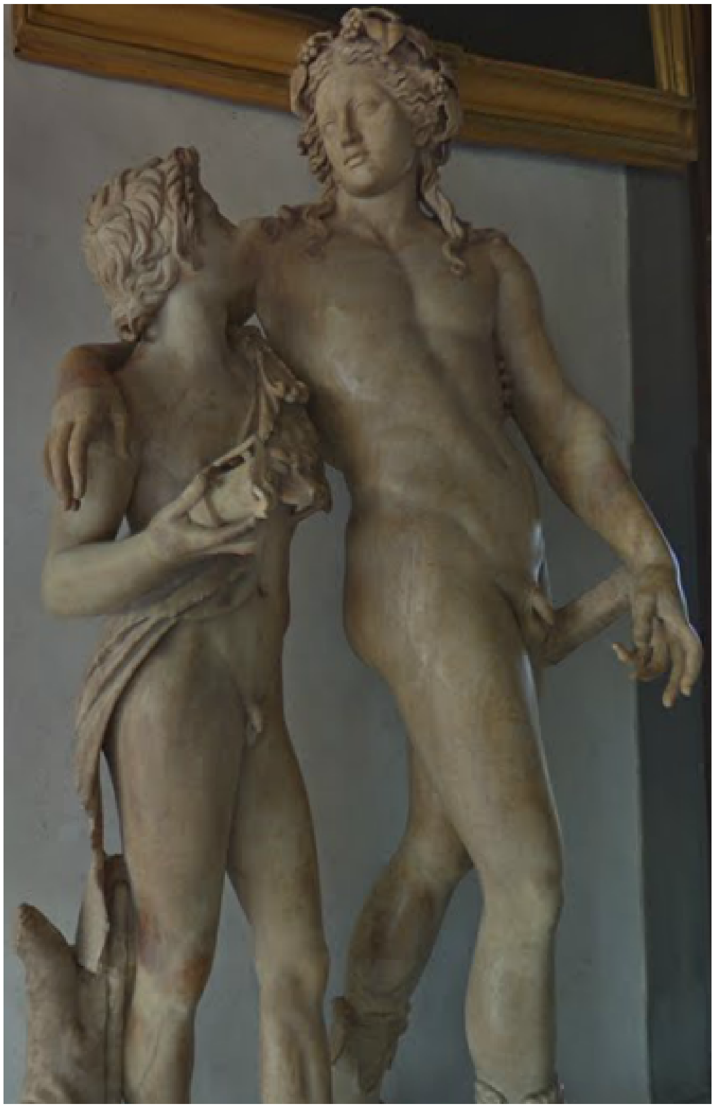
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal has his first appointment with Doctor Clayton.
>
> “Your grief is not limited to your daughter, is it? You grieve her death, but people don’t have to die to be lost from us. You grieve another kind of loss.”
>
> “You are very perceptive, Doctor Clayton, like you can read my mind.”
>
> “I wouldn’t go that far…” Daniel chuckles and shakes his head.
>
> I would, thinks Hannibal. “You are far more perceptive than Doctor Dumont suggested.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



Dionysus and Satyr Courtesy Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Chapter 44

Hannibal has his first appointment with Doctor Clayton.

The lobby of Clayton’s office is as welcoming as it is large. Hannibal stands with hands in the pockets of his stylish summer jacket. He wears an Armani ensemble of muted blue and a crisp white polo style shirt. It would appear that blue is the dominant color in Clayton’s office, too.

The pretty receptionist, Constanzia, sits busy with her files and her phone, but she occasionally looks up from her work to offer shy smiles from behind her desk. Hannibal had shared a demi-tasse of espresso with her earlier and found her quite pleasant to talk to.

Hannibal had arrived early to his appointment as the lovely Constanzia had been opening up the office and had been told Doctor Clayton was running late this morning.

Since he has the time, Hannibal decides to look around at the artwork Clayton has placed around the lobby. He notices the print of Raphael's *Galatea* immediately; it is the largest piece in the room in part because of the ornate gilded frame that contains it. Clayton clearly identifies with Renaissance pieces, not surprisingly since he lives and practices in Florence.

Hannibal notes there is an overarching theme to Clayton's selections. These are not randomly selected pieces. Each evokes the same emotion. Hannibal's lips twist slightly at the subtle beauty of Clayton's thinking and his apparent empathy for his patients.

Each piece in the room is an illustration of love, not just the romantic kind, but love in all its forms. What better emotion to contemplate while waiting to unload a tempest of grief. Hannibal thinks it entirely the case that Clayton hand-picked the pieces himself. Doctor Clayton continues to intrigue Hannibal.

Hannibal's attention is drawn to a scaled down replica of the same Hellenic sculpture he had kept in his home in Baltimore. The original piece, a second century Roman copy of the Greek original, *Dionysus and Satyr,* is one of the hundreds of pieces on display on the second floor of the Uffizi. The sculpture is part of the private Medici collection and like so many other classical pieces once owned by the famed family, it offered inspiration for the artists of their time.

Like Hannibal's, this one too is a smaller but faithful reproduction of the piece, a rendering of Greek ideals, of amorous desire brought forth in a ritual of wine. Hannibal had kept his in one of the bedrooms upstairs, but after Will had begun spending nights, he had moved it to the antique black console table in the foyer next to an exquisite Greek kylix. Will had wasted no time commenting on the new addition to the foyer. Hannibal's brow raises slightly, amusement tugging at his lips as he recalls finding Will's scarf tied around it in a bow, his gloves stuck over each of the figures' curly haired heads.

Hannibal has missed male companionship since arriving in Florence. Du Maurier provides a certain kind of companionship. The kind of companionship that has caused him to reevaluate what companionship means.

Of all the people and patients to cross his path, he had never met one who had aroused his curiosity or intellect as Will has. None had been as compelling or challenging. Seeking insight from the manufactured manipulations he had introduced to other patients had become as trite for Hannibal as the proverbial mouse trap once Will had been thrust upon him like a beautiful angry storm in Jack Crawford's office.

Will had required a much more elaborate maze of manipulation. And the deeper into Hannibal's maze he had wandered; the more Hannibal had desired to keep him there. Hannibal had believed that after Will had come back to him to resume his therapy on that cold winter evening in Baltimore, showing up promptly at seven at his office that Will had desired to be there, too. He wants to believe that still.

Hannibal's thoughts are interrupted by the commotion he hears from the kitchen area at the back of the lobby. He quickly realizes the noise emanates from the rear entrance and that the source of the noise must be Clayton.

Constanzia turns from her terminal to greet the harried doctor as he walks to the back stairs a flurry of olive green and beige and Hannibal notes, damp hair and no socks.

“Doctor Clayton…” Constanzia calls from her desk. Clayton pauses at the sound of her voice. “Your nine o’clock is here.”

“I have a nine o’clock?”

Clayton walks over to her and glances at the computer screen, apparently looking at his schedule. He looks up and Hannibal merely lifts his head as he continues to stand by the open pane curio cabinet. Hannibal notices the hesitation in his movements as he considers whether he should ask his receptionist to run interference for him or if he should simply…

“Doctor Boucher?” Clayton’s voice booms across the empty lobby. Hannibal nods. “I apologize for the delay. Would you like to come upstairs?”

“Of course.” He watches Clayton take his files in his free hand from Constanzia. He is clearly flustered and trying not to show it. Hannibal enjoys watching the subtle shift of limbs beneath the pressed linen.

“Top of the steps, first door on the right.”

The voice is not Will’s. Hannibal is surprised he had expected it would be. He’s not sure he’s not disappointed. The pitch is higher and the tone is different and there is a slight local accent, evidence of many years living away from the US. Clayton has embraced his adopted culture wholeheartedly.

Hannibal walks to the bottom of the steps to join Clayton. He is perhaps a couple inches shorter than Hannibal, not very far off from Will’s height. He smells of deodorant soap and hair gel which he apparently applied while driving. Hannibal finds him refreshingly unpretentious as he smiles and gestures for Hannibal to go first while he lugs his attaché case up the steps after him.

After opening the door to his office and showing Hannibal in, Clayton walks to his desk and begins to unpack his case while talking to Hannibal.

“I was out yesterday and my office manager must have scheduled your appointment. But she is out today and I…never thought to call in and confirm my appointments for today. Did you wait long?”

He glances at his laptop and winces. Hannibal knows it is well after nine. He finds himself wanting to put the doctor at ease.

“I didn’t consider it waiting. I was admiring the art work in your lobby. I actually lost track of the time.” Hannibal smiles one his most patient smiles. Clayton runs his hand through his thick curls and nods as he looks absently about his office.

Hannibal’s breath hitches in his chest. The gesture is…so familiar.

“Thank you for that. Please, have a seat.”

Hannibal looks around the room, spots the two chairs facing one another in front of the bay window and ponders the arrangement. He crosses to the couches instead. That seating arrangement simply will not do. He seats himself dead center in the most centrally located of the couches. He is immediately struck by the décor. Clayton’s approach to psychiatry is…progressive to say the least.

The brightness of the Tuscan sun makes it impossible to shield the interior of the space from light. There is light in every corner, leaving no room for the sequestering of dark secrets. Confession is good for the soul thinks Hannibal and the ocean blue of the walls is sufficiently inviting and peaceful to lull the souls of all the sheep who pass through Clayton's door into submission.

Hannibal finds himself admiring the carefully constructed office. He thinks Clayton must be very successful in prying even the most reluctant of patients open like a stubborn clam in this beautiful sunny room. Hannibal's eyes are drawn to the beach print on the wall. He imagines it an important print judging by its placement and size. It is signed and dated by Clayton himself and Hannibal thinks it is a photo of home…east coast, perhaps.

Daniel finishes arranging his desk and fixes his tie. His patient is here for grief counseling so the notation next to his name says. Daniel finds his new patient remarkably composed, but people often wear a mask initially. And yet, he does feel sadness from his patient. His sadness trails him like a vapor, barely detectable but very much a part of him. He pulls this sadness on every morning with his trousers and drinks it with every meal.

He seats himself near his patient so he can look at him in a three quarter view not straight on. He notes the immaculate attire, the perfect hair that frames his face and accentuates cheekbones as smooth and sharp as cut marble, but his focus is drawn to the piercing eyes that seem to capture everything at once yet give up nothing.

Daniel is aware those piercing eyes have followed his every move, not overtly, but Daniel feels them upon him faint and tremulous, almost wistful. He places his notebook and pen on the coffee table and turns to his patient who reclines on the couch with legs crossed a look of mild curiosity on his face.

He gestures to the pitcher of water, but Hannibal declines.

"Let me take just a minute to read over the intake questionnaire and your referral."

"Take your time."

Hannibal sees the subtle change in Clayton's face as he reads. Du Maurier made an impression on him, but Hannibal is not sure about the nature of the impression.

"Doctor Dumont was your psychiatrist?"

"Until recently, yes. She devotes her practice to private clients around the province. She was often unavailable for weekly sessions."

"She didn't write much except to say just that. Is her availability the only reason?"

"She and I agreed that a change in therapists and therapy might prove more…efficacious. It was a mutual decision I assure you."

"Oh…" Daniel does not have anything professional to add. He closes his mouth and hopes he doesn't look too stunned. Or annoyed.

Daniel swallows and pushes thoughts of Dumont from his mind. He thinks she is doing her best to ingratiate herself by referring clients. On odd thing to do since he has yet to meet her Lydia let alone offer recommendations as to treatment. He will have to discuss the referring of patients to

Dumont this weekend. He will have to discuss it with Maria, too. Apparently she did not get the memo about new patients.

But, this gentleman is here now, and it would be rude not to continue with the initial consultation after making him wait for half an hour.

“I met Doctor Dumont only recently. I am surprised she referred anyone so soon.”

“Perhaps your reputation precedes you. She seemed to be of the opinion we would work well together and spoke highly of you.”

“Well, that’s encouraging, isn’t it?” Daniel picks up his pen and notebook. “So, I read that you are a professor over at the Uffizi?”

“Yes, I’m one of many assistant curators.”

Daniel smiles warmly. He doubts his patient really views his position in such menial terms. He imagines Victor to be quite learned in his field given the swell of pride he feels despite the modest response. A lot of pride in fact.

“Ah, well the Uffizi is huge. Which area or collection is yours to play guardian of the gate?”

“I have access to the Vasari Corridor and the Palazzo Pitti. I prepare tours and lectures for visiting professors, foreign dignitaries and the like.”

“I’m not surprised. You seem pretty cosmopolitan. At the risk of embarrassing you, how many languages do you speak?”

“Fluently? Five.”

“And Latin?”

“Of course. And since my studies included the Classical period…”

“You know Greek, too.”

“How many languages do you speak? Italian, certainly.”

“And French. That’s it. Your accent is hard to place. Eastern European?”

“Yes.” Hannibal says, “But I grew up in France.”

“Do you like your work at the Uffizi?”

“I like the solitude. I like preparing and giving lectures.”

Hannibal decides Clayton’s smile is quite charming. He has a way of curving only the left side of his lips and tilting his head just so. The peculiar little smile is reminiscent of the reluctant indulgent smiles he used to get from Will. Hannibal had enjoyed provoking those hard won smiles from Will, but this doctor seems to offer them unsolicited.

“You can make your own schedule?”

“Most of the time. I enjoy a certain flexibility, yes. I imagine you have been to Uffizi more than once considering your choices downstairs.”

“Not nearly as often as I would like. I have yet to see the whole museum. But it is one of my favorite places to spend an afternoon.”

“When did you last indulge yourself?’

Daniel thinks a moment. “Must be last Spring. You know, I’ve been trying to see the Vasari Corridor but access is restricted. I guess I don’t have the clout to get in.”

“Only professors are admitted and very special guests.” Hannibal leans back in his seat waiting for Clayton’s response.

“I suppose you have to know someone.” Daniel’s face breaks into a full-fledged grin.

“It helps.” Hannibal waves a finger at Clayton. “Fishing for favors already?”

“Too forward?”

“We’ll see how the session goes.”

“Fair enough. Do you prefer doctor or professor?"

“If we must be formal, doctor will do. You may call me Victor if you prefer.”

“All right. Victor, then. The intake questionnaire indicates you checked grief issues. Tell me about them.”

“I’ve suffered the misfortune of losing a daughter. There have been other losses. According to my former therapist, I am in a holding pattern somewhere between bargaining and full blown depression.”

“Ok. And how long have you been struggling with this?”

“About two years.”

“And how would you characterize your behavior? How have you been coping?”

“I continued with life, but I know have withdrawn from it.”

“What do you want to happen with therapy?”

“To do more than survive. To find joy despite the loss.”

“Would you be comfortable telling me a little about what happened?”

“Of course.” Hannibal understands Clayton needs to put events into context. He would have followed the same script Clayton is using to analyze the needs of his own patients.

As Hannibal tells Clayton his prepared story, a story that parallels actual recent events in some respects, he observes the expressions and mannerisms displayed by the younger man seated next to him. He listens carefully to everything Hannibal says, interrupts barely at all, but writes copiously as Hannibal relates his reasons for seeking therapy.

Hannibal knows every line, every contour of Will's face by heart. Though this doctor is striking in his own way, his resemblance to Will physically is fleeting. Hannibal sees in him a Will that might have been had Will's life taken a different trajectory. He lacks Will's gravitas and brooding alertness. His gaze, when he glances at Hannibal from his note taking, is mild and warm though there is no denying the color is stunning, accentuated by his faded olive jacket.

Hannibal knows that were he sitting in the psychiatrist's chair he would be able to elicit this doctor's thoughts and desires, the ones he keeps concealed beneath his suit and his professional veneer. Bringing them out as a patient will require skill and finesse.

As they talk the idea occurs to Hannibal that since he is the patient, he might avail himself of Clayton's expertise. Hannibal thinks he could benefit from Clayton's honest and objective insight, certainly more than Du Maurier's. Clayton has no agenda and would provide an alternative point of view. Clayton will also provide insight into Du Maurier. Hannibal recognizes that Clayton may provide her with insight into him as well, but she may find her position less rather than more advantageous. She really has no idea what Hannibal is capable of.

Daniel senses his patient has spilled as much he is going to this initial consult and Daniel is fine with that. He has a ten o'clock scheduled and had thought he would have time to prepare for her. His efforts to scale down his office hours are not working out and he will apparently have to reiterate his instructions to Maria, who stubbornly continues to schedule patients because she knows that Daniel is treating Will off the books.

His prospective new patient sits as composed as when he entered Daniel's office. He has not even glanced at the expensive watch he wears on his wrist and Daniel imagines he would sit here all day content to watch him work. Victor's loneliness drips from him and pools at his feet like an oil spill.

"Doc…Victor," Daniel finds it awkward to refer to him by his first name given their ages. He feels like he should be more deferential somehow and cannot shake the feeling.

"I know you understand the stages of grief. You're actually quite good at analyzing your own feelings as far as I can tell from talking to you. But knowing what they are doesn't make experiencing them any easier. You exhibit classic avoidance. There are associations that are very strong and understandably you avoid them because they evoke such pain. You mentioned dogs remind you of your loss. The pain for you is deep. It is as though nearly everything reminds you of the loss."

"Love and death are the great hinges on which all human sympathies turn. We are affected by the things we see around us every day." Hannibal agrees.

"And our world is only as large we make it." Daniel responds.

"My world is small because I have made it so." Hannibal says leaning forward so that he breaches Daniel's personal space. Daniel remains where he is. He meets Hannibal's eyes.

"Have you?"

"You imply I have grown comfortable with my grief."

"Maybe. You hold your memories close, because to share too much, even with your potential therapist," Daniel pauses and smiles and is rewarded with a hint of a smile from Victor, "is to admit someone else access into your private world where your loss still exists."

Hannibal sits quite still, amazed at the insight Clayton appears to have. He is intriguing indeed.

"Admittance does not come easily." Hannibal says simply.

"I would imagine not. As you suggested yourself, you need companionship. But, companionship is a mine field for you. Your senses cause you to become overloaded with memories and you retreat, but the loneliness hurts too, and after a while you venture out again, but…"

"But the cycle begins all over again." Hannibal says.

"Yes."

"Have you ever lost anyone close to you?" Hannibal asks watching Clayton's eyes carefully.

"Uh, pets…not people, not yet. But, I will someday and I dread it." Daniel says thinking that loss can assume many forms. The loss caused by distance; of either actual miles or of growing apart. The loss of a parent slipping into dementia. The loss of a lover to someone else…

Daniel senses his patient's loneliness may not stem from the finality of death despite what he told Daniel about his adopted daughter. His patient presents as highly intelligent and resilient. He certainly has not revealed everything in the half hour they have been talking. Were it not for his sheer strength of will, Daniel is certain his sadness would bleed from him, raw and hot.

The sadness Daniel feels from him has become more acute as Victor has sat conversing with Daniel. He has asked Daniel as many questions about himself as Daniel has asked him. Victor is a powerful presence, his inner strength primal yet contained, tightly coiled inside like…Will's.

There is another emotion Daniel feels from his prospective patient. Regret twists inside the tight coil. Daniel thinks that perhaps the regret is the stronger, that grief is not really the emotion for which Victor seeks solace. Regret raises the possibility that his patient feels responsible for the loss, that there was something he could have, should have done, but did not. Or, he did do something, but perceives his actions as a mistake.

Daniel decides to tread lightly until Victor discloses more. Like any other patient, Daniel must gain his trust so that he feels comfortable opening up. The sadness that trails Victor is very real, and loneliness follows close behind.

As Victor talked about his loss, Daniel thinks his patient never left the first stage of grief. Victor remains in denial and isolation despite acknowledging the loss. He has gone through the motions, seen evidence, but he has never really accepted the finality. Daniel wonders how Du Maurier missed it. Then again, she can't feel her patient's emotions. Victor is extremely practiced at masking his behind a visage of well coifed control.

"Your grief is not limited to your daughter, is it? You grieve her death, but people don't have to die to be lost from us. You grieve another kind of loss."

"You are very perceptive, Doctor Clayton, like you can read my mind."

“I wouldn’t go that far…” Daniel chuckles and shakes his head.

I would, thinks Hannibal. “You are far more perceptive than Doctor Dumont suggested.”

Hannibal wonders at just how intuitive Clayton is. He sits calmly soaking Hannibal up with those deep green eyes and Hannibal imagines that were he to reach out his hand and place it over Hannibal’s chest he might wince at the tender scoring he has unwittingly inflicted their entire session.

“I can only be as perceptive as my patient allows.” Daniel says.

“I think I would like to continue seeing you if that is acceptable to you.”

“Well, about that. Doctor Dumont could not have known and it’s not her fault…”

Daniel catches Victor’s dark eyes, eyes that gleam cold and unyielding, yet the embers of regret flicker refusing to become ash because his patient holds the embers close and though the embers burn, they are all he has. Daniel cannot bring himself to send him on his way. Before he can finish, his patient speaks up.

“You are not accepting new patients. I understand, but you should have mentioned that…” Hannibal starts to rise from the couch.

He has not felt indignation in a long while, but his ire is piqued. Did Du Maurier know and deliberately send him here? To what end? In hopes that Clayton would express that one trait Hannibal cannot abide…

“A recent decision, yes, and one apparently lost on my staff…but since you are here and we seem to have developed a rapport, I will do my best to accommodate you.”

The chill in the room evaporates as he watches his patient relax into his seat once more. Daniel feels like he just avoided a powder keg although there is no incendiary evidence on his patient’s countenance whatsoever.

Hannibal feels the ire dissipate and shift away from Clayton to where it belongs. He likes talking with Clayton. He is not Will, but he does not have to be. Clayton is a little salt in the wound he carries, but he is strangely comforting as well. He is both ache and remedy.

“May I ask why you aren’t accepting new patients?”

“Well, I have scaled back my practice temporarily, referred some patients out to clear my afternoons in order to work with another patient.”

“A singular patient?” Hannibal asks wondering if Lydia is the patient. Du Maurier had not mentioned her substance abusing suicidal patient would be infringing on Clayton’s time to such a degree.

“Yes. One patient. But this time frame is available if you would like weekly sessions that I promise will be the full hour, or more if you tell me ahead of time.”

“I am much relieved. That would be satisfactory. You know, Doctor Dumont told me she sees a patient in Fiesole, in fact, I believe it is this patient that caused the…reduction in her availability. She also mentioned you are consulting with her about this patient.”

“She told you that because you wanted to know how she knew me, why she was referring you to me.”

“Yes, despite the dogs…perhaps because of the dogs.”

“Well, given that you associate dogs with your loss, I wouldn’t recommend adopting one right away. But, she is correct that creating positive associations to replace the negative would be part of the healing.”

“Perhaps…gradually.”

“Of course. I treat plenty of patients without canine therapy. It has to be a good fit and in your case, I agree canine therapy is not an option at this time.”

“The patient in Fiesole has benefitted from this therapy?”

“I’ll find out this weekend. I will be taking some dogs with me to see her Saturday.”

“Well, I hope only the best in her recovery.”

“Me, too. I do have another patient waiting. If you want to settle your insurance and payment information with Constanzia on your way out, that would be great. And she will put you on my calendar for next week.”

“I’m sure you will confirm it this time?” Hannibal says tilting his head at Clayton. He is gratified by the pursing of lips as Clayton bites back a smile. The green eyes soften at the equally soft rebuke.

“Absolutely. Take care, Victor.”

He holds out his hand to Hannibal and Hannibal takes it, feels the warmth and sincerity in the grip. He feels the calloused palm, the roughness of fingers that hold something besides a pen with regularity. A musician perhaps. There is confidence and compassion in the green eyes that stare back at him. Hannibal feels the promise of intimacy he has missed so much.

As he walks back down the rear stairs so that Clayton’s ten o’clock can ascend to the office using the front stairs, Hannibal thinks Du Maurier deliberately placed a hurdle for him to jump over and right at the starting line. Whether she knew Clayton was downsizing or not does not matter. She has a session with Clayton this weekend, allowing her perhaps hours to influence and persuade. What is to be done about that? Hannibal decides a week is a terribly long time to wait to see Clayton again.

Daniel does not have time to dwell on his impressions of his new patient. He removes his notes on Professor Boucher from his notebook and is just finishing creating a file for him when his ten o’clock raps on the door. Three patients later, Daniel can call it day. It is not until he is on his way out the door that Constanzia tells him that Boucher has not only scheduled for the same time next week, he paid for an entire month of sessions out of pocket and with cash.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up in Chapter 45

Will reads some Dante, dreams and receives a call from the twins. They are on their way back to Florence. Unfortunately, Hannibal receives a call from Roberta and meets Luciano and Lucia at da Vinci Fiumicino Airport. Take-out, anyone?

Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

> Will reads some Dante, dreams and receives a call from the twins. They are on their way back to Florence. How unfortunate for the twins that, after shopping with Du Maurier, Hannibal receives a call from Roberta and prepares to meet Luciano and Lucia at da Vinci Fiumicino Airport. Take-out, anyone?
>
> This is your Inferno, Will. Abandon hope, you who enter here…
>
> Dante got out.
>
> Will narrows his eyes against the wind as his fingers seek the reassuring touch of fur at his side.
>
> Dante did not waste away in apathy or indifference of good and evil. Are you an uncommitted soul, with that ill band of angels mixed, undecided and…indifferent?
>
> I'm not…indifferent.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 45

Will reads some Dante, dreams and receives a call from the twins. They are on their way back to Florence. How unfortunate for the twins that, after shopping with Du Maurier, Hannibal receives a call from Roberta and prepares to meet Luciano and Lucia at da Vinci Fiumicino Airport. Take-out, anyone?

I am the way to the city of sorrow, the way to eternal pain, the way to punishment. Justice moved my higher maker, building with divine power, supreme wisdom and first love. Before me, there was nothing, and I will last forever: Abandon hope you that enter here.

Sighs, groans, and wails now pierced the starless air, so that soon I began to weep. A confusion of tongues and strange accents sounded in pain and anger. Voices deep and hoarse and shrill, with the sounds of blows intermingled, roiled in the dirty air, like sand spiraling in a whirlwind. I said: "Teacher, I'm surrounded by turmoil. Whose griefs are making this relentless stir?"

He answered: "Outsiders who lived without commitment. Their neutral souls mix here with the angels that stood only for themselves, undecided, neither rebellious nor faithful to the deity. To keep *her beauty, heaven put them out, but hell could not receive them, since it would have been improved by their presence."*

Dante’s Inferno – Hell, Canto III

Will is dimly aware of the book slipping from his fingers as he drifts into his fractured dreamscape. He feels the crunch of tortured rock and cracked shards of bone beneath his boots as he trudges through the dark and smoke filled remains of the forest he once knew as a sanctuary, the one place into which he could retreat from the oppressive onslaught of unwanted emotions and Greeks bearing gifts...

He hears a whine, low pitched and ragged. He turns to see his sole companion in this dark charred place, the grey wolf. The two of them approach the boulder that blocks their path and conceals the serpent tailed eagle from view. Will hears its giant feathers rustling in the sharp wind that burns hot across exposed skin.

He knows if he looks he will see. He has lived with fear all his life, but this…this fear is not the fear of losing himself, it is the fear that he already has. His jaws clench tight and when he swallows it feels like chalk going down to mix with the grit he inhales with every breath. His entire being is filled with this place. Why does he keep returning here?

He forces himself to take a step, and another. Moving his feet along the parched earth becomes easier until finally, he rounds the boulder and feels the soft thick fur of the wolf graze his fingers.

Will glances down at the wolf at his side to see ears laid back and its fur rising along its back. The wolf growls and Will lifts his head. He moves closer to see through the swirling smoke, eyes stinging and dry as he blinks back the fear; swallows it down slick and familiar into his gut.

The serpent tailed eagle emerges from the smoke majestic, black, its red rimmed eyes focused on Will, and its beak dripping with the blood of the carcass caught in its talons. The wolf nudges Will with its nose, still cold and wet despite the biting wind and heat. Will approaches the winged beast and it angles its head to the side as it watches Will edge closer.

The carcass is canine, a wolf. Blood, fur, and fang cover the ground, the echoes of wounded cries lost in a feeding frenzy fill Will’s mind.

The eagle rips off a piece of the meat and tosses it to Will. The chunk of flesh lands at his feet, raw, red, and flecked with bits of bone and sinew. Will stands motionless unable to accept the invitation but unwilling to depart without learning more. The eagle continues to devour its prey as it watches Will, waiting.

Is this meat an act of God, Will? Hannibal’s voice whispers.

I’ve given up good and evil for behaviorism.

Will speaks into the wind, but the monstrous eagle tilts its head, eyes dark and deep as they stare into Will’s. His flesh moves beneath his shirt and he knows the scaly thing writhes inside him. He knows if he peeked inside his jacket he would see the scar he bears rise and fall with its twisting.

Then you must know why you are here.

The eagle’s talons scrape the ground and the red rimmed eyes take on the aspect of Hannibal’s, peering at him over a wine glass at the dinner table.

Where is here?

This is your Inferno, Will. Abandon hope, you who enter here…

Dante got out.

Will narrows his eyes against the wind as his fingers seek the reassuring touch of fur at his side.

Dante did not waste away in apathy or indifference of good and evil. Are you an uncommitted soul, with that ill band of angels mixed, undecided and…indifferent?

I’m not…indifferent.

Aren’t you? What is good? What is evil?

Opposites. Points on our moral compass. To…to define our actions.

Will presses a hand against his jacket to quiet the thing that stirs inside.

Was Margot evil? She tried to kill her brother.

Mason deserved to die.

Did he?

Mason is evil.

You make pronouncements easily. He is already dead, more so than those already in the ground… So Margot is good?

No…she…

Not so easily, then? And Abigail. What about Abigail, Will. You cared for her.

Will feels the words light upon his neck hot as breath, a trace of soft lips across his skin. His response is spoken just as softly, syllables slipping into the sorrow laden wind.

So did you.

Perhaps more. Was she good or evil?

I can’t judge her. And neither can you.

I didn’t. What are you, Will? Are you…good?

I thought I was…I tried to do good things.

Doing bad things to bad people feels good. Are you bad, Will?

I’ve done bad things, but I…

Apathy and indifference, Will. It's your Inferno and you can leave anytime…

Will steps closer, hair whipping about in a wind so strong and hot it cuts at his face, stings his cheeks. He stares at the monstrous bird and thinks maybe he has been neither rebellious nor faithful to the deity. But which deity? To God…or to Hannibal?

I don't hide from God, Will and neither should you…

What god do you pray to?

I don't pray…Prey… Problem solving is hunting…a pleasure we can share.

The eagle begins to raise itself like an oily black phoenix from the scorched dirt to flap its great wings. It screeches and turns its head. Will follows its gaze to a cluster of burnt and ravaged wood, branches once graced with fragrant verdant leaves now brittle and scattered like the rest of the dead things that litter this place.

But not all of the things here are dead. Will watches another serpent tail slither between broken branches to sneak its way into a thicket of twigs and smoke… Not a serpent thinks Will, a viper.

A flash of light crashes outside the window of the familiar blue bedroom and Will is saturated with light so bright he squints into the fireplace as he stands between the chairs and table he knows so well. He is in Baltimore again, reliving yet another memory in the luxurious lair where he had sat many winter nights sipping expensive amber drinks in expensive pajamas a size too large for his slender frame.

This night he remembers. The night he and Hannibal made lomo saltado together. The night he sliced the ginger.

Will unbuttons another shimmering button of shell so the blue silk of his borrowed pajama shirt hangs loosely off one shoulder. The fire burns hot and bright, the only source of light in the bedroom. Will sips at the golden hued whiskey that slips smoothly between his lips.

What were we talking about?

He looks to Hannibal who has appeared suddenly in one of the chairs wrapped in burgundy colored silk that does little to conceal the taut musculature beneath. Will watches the shadows of the flames move across his face tempering features stark in any other light.

Will sinks into his familiar seat, across from the being he loathes and loves, his gaze fixed on the strange bird like creature that sits on a coffee table buffed so fine that the flames of the fire seem to lick at the surface. It is clearly Japanese in origin, a winged goblin and stylistically similar to the prints mounted on either side of Hannibal's bed.

Hannibal lifts his tumbler to his lips and sips slowly, allowing the pleasant burn to coat his throat before he speaks.

I was introducing you to a tengu figure I picked up in Kyoto. This is a replica of the more ancient kind. Have you heard of them?

Hannibal gestures to the print that hangs on the panel beside the bathroom. Will studies the image of two figures pitched in battle, a spear wielding samurai and a malevolent tengu. He swirls the whiskey around as he turns back to Hannibal.

Japanese folklore…they are demons or pranksters, tempting the faithful from the path of Buddhism.

Hannibal nods as Will examines the ugly little statuette in front of him more closely, marvels at the detail of the samurai attire and notes the sharpness of the beak and the coldness of the deeply set eyes.

They are the transformed spirits of men condemned to walk the earth forever caught between heaven and hell.

Why do they walk? Punishment?

Will thinks that must be the reason the little tengu on the table appears so grumpy.

There are two kinds. Konoha and korasu tengu. This one is korasu tengu, part man and part bird. In life they were prideful in their ignorance…korasu tengu punish the vain and the arrogant.

And the rude? Will taunts…gently.

Hannibal lifts a brow as he glances at the fire and licks his lips before turning back to Will. Will tosses his head back, deliciously dizzy with drink and shakes the curls from his face to gaze once again at Hannibal through half lidded eyes. He has just tickled a funny bone that is often hard to reach. He tries not to grin at Hannibal as the fire warms him without and the whiskey from within.

According to legend they have great magic. They speak to us without moving their mouths. If they choose, they can go anywhere without moving their wings and they can enter your dreams.

Will smiles as he takes another sip from his glass.

And why would they enter my dreams?

Hannibal leans against the back of the chair, angles his head, a thoughtful expression graces his features as shadows from the fire continue to dance across his face. His eyes are bright and luminous, and Will thinks it must be the fire that paints Hannibal's face with such unguarded affection.

To protect you. Like the korasu tengu of the forest, this one is my protector and I would like to present him to you…

Will stares at the statue on the table and then to the print on the wall. His mind turns as he posits Hannibal's intentions, tries to imagine what mythical mirage Hannibal would have manifest in his mind. Will internalized this embedded imagery for a reason and his mind recalled it for a reason. Associations come quickly…

Japanese Korasu Tengu Late Edo Period courtesy Wikipedia

Will snaps awake to the sound of his phone. He looks at the number and sees it is one of the Paolini twins. He sucks in air to clear his head of where he has just been. He makes a silent bet which one of the twins is calling.

"Hello?"

"Signor Graham?" Lucia's voice bursts loudly through the speaker.

Yes! Will makes a victory fist in the air, then says, "Lucia…uh, how are you?"

"Bene, bene. Look, me and my brother will be leaving de Gaulle Airport today, later this afternoon. We should get into Rome eh, about six or so."

"Why not just fly into Peretola here in Firenze? " Florence has its own airport, Aeroporto Amerigo Vespucci, so Will wonders what the reason could possibly be to fly into da Vinci, instead. The drive from Rome to Florence is well over two hours even in good traffic.

"The flights to Firenze straight through all booked up. Anyway, Luciano and I want to visit family so we drive back and spend the night in Orvieto, is only an hour from Rome. We drink, we relax, and we call you tomorrow or next day, bene?"

Will hears Luciano nuzzling at her neck, more like grazing Will thinks as he listens to heavy breathing and lip smacking. He has to force his mind not to imagine what they have been doing for the last two weeks.

"Have you talked to Mr. Verger?"

"No…he is kinda creepy. Luciano talked to him once. Have you?"

"No. Are you at the airport now?"

“Oh, no, we are having lunch along Champs Elysees right now! We, uh…take a cab to de Gaulle...later.”

Images of the famous three lane boulevard fill Will’s mind. He has never been there, but images from a travel book are better than the alternative images his mind threatens to conjure up. Will’s Italian is better than either of the twins knows and Will almost cringes with the obscenities that affront his ear.

“Did you gather more information on Lecter in Paris?” he says hoping to shake Lucia loose from her brother who Will imagines is slurping at her neck with a tongue stained red with Parisian wine.

“Oh…mais, oui! We did…Luciano! Scusate, scusate…” Will listens to more Italian and more giggling. He cracks his neck and wishes he had lost his bet.

“Aye, we have more information and we found a relative and uh, how you say…we spied on her for a few days, but we bring everything on the plane with us. See you in a few days. Ciao!”

“Lucia! Wait, don’t hang up…” Will talks to silence. He hits redial but of course no one picks up.

Hoping they call back is a waste of time. Will considers they are young and drunk and in Paris. As ruthless as they are disgusting, the pair has their share of vices and drinking is one of them. Will shakes his head not wanting to dwell on the other one. He cannot phone Mason for the information. Mason still makes his skin crawl and his voice also conjures images Will would rather not think about.

Besides, Mason thinks Will is with the twins or he would have never let them go. Will allowed Luciano to handle it. Will can feign innocence if Mason finds out. Will isn’t supposed to know that the twins are his handlers. They will someday be his executioners.

Mason still intends to feed Will to his pigs, at least metaphorically. After he catches Hannibal for him, of course.

The twins might have sent copies of what they could to Mason. That would be in line with their behavior so far. It is important that Mason believe he has the upper hand at all times. He believes the twins are in complete control. He believes Will has been sufficiently demoralized by his experience, chastised by his doctors and castigated into submission by his superiors at the FBI. The man who cut Doctor Lecter free from his restraints no longer exists. This is Will’s design.

Mason won’t know about the palazzo yet. The people who handle his books and investments know nothing about Mason’s other dirty business. They don’t know that Mason’s hired gun resides in the tax write-off that just burned down in Florence. If Will has been out of country, Will shouldn’t know about it either. Will doesn’t even have to tell the twins until they find out about the fire.

Will has not made any insurance claims nor does he intend to. He had taken the information for D’Angelo’s and Daniel’s benefit. Neither of them needs to know about the twisted game he is playing with Mason. Taking the insurance forms was…was what normal people do. Thanks to the fire, Mason can’t control where he resides now. Not without tipping his hand.

He still hasn’t called Jack about the laptop. Will likes being off the reservation.

He can wait for the twins to exhaust their revelry. He is more intrigued by the scrap of information Lucia had revealed before hanging up.

Hannibal has a living relative. A woman. Interesting.

He gets up from the couch and stretches. His shirt is new and stiff as are the khaki shorts that fall to his knees. Will had limited his purchases to summer clothes despite Daniel's occasional urging to try on autumn attire. He adjusts his shirt and looks over at the dogs. Cara and Bella perk up from their respective roosts on the rug, ears erect and mouths agape.

"C'mon." Will says, "Let's go for a walk, and then I'll practice…after lunch."

Even though Daniel knows what sits inside his fridge and cabinets, he expects Will to continue to keep a dietary log. Daniel does not let him forget that therapy continues; only the geography has changed. For Will it seems the therapy never ends.

Will frowns as he glances at the piano and the sheet music. As Will considers the Inferno, the one in his dreams and the one lying on the rug, its pages splayed beneath the binding, he supposes playing a duet with his psychiatrist is not all that strange. It is all too familiar. He stoops to pick up Dante's epic commentary on good and evil and sets it on the coffee table before whistling for the dogs to follow him out the back door.

****

"So, how did you find our doctor?" Du Maurier asks, as she looks into a shop window to adjust her sun hat.

Hannibal considers the blonde tresses that spill along her narrow shoulders, framing the pale lavender of her dress in gold. The viper wears Versace he muses as they walk along the Ponte Vecchio to shop for jewelry, an indulgence of Du Maurier's that remains unsated. Ponte Vecchio was built for Du Maurier. Most of the shops along the ancient bridge are jewelry shops.

Hannibal doesn't mind. He is enjoying the view and enjoying indulging his own preoccupation with the medieval architecture of the famous covered bridge that spans the Arno.

"He is…intriguing, provocatively so."

Clayton's clairvoyant remarks reverberate around Hannibal's head, chimes in a clock clanging since his appointment. Hannibal remembers clearly every phrase, every gesture that passed between them in those forty odd minutes. He would believe Du Maurier had prepped him, except Clayton had seemed genuinely surprised at her referral.

Clayton had seemed entirely genuine about everything. Hannibal finds himself clinging to the bittersweet longing he had experienced sitting on the beige couch in the sun-filled room. He pulls it around him like a sweater, to insulate him from the beautiful icy thing that walks beside him.

…the loneliness hurts too, and after a while you venture out again, but…

"I suspect your session caused a yearning for your former profession." Du Maurier says, touching his sleeve.

"Yes." Hannibal agrees. *A yearning for many things.*

"It is good to leave your sanctuary, Hannibal. You spend too much time alone. Familiarity even with oneself breeds contempt."

“It can, and yet, better the devil you know when he shares your bed and eats at your table.”

“Better still when the devil prepares the meal?”

Du Maurier slides her fingers along his lapels. She waits for the smile that does not come. She drops her hands from his chest. Rancor from the cool rebuke roils sour upon her tongue but when she speaks, her voice does not falter.

“What did you serve him?” She says as her fingers glide over the shiny trinkets and baubles.

“Half-truths, on a very convincing platter.”

“You like him.” Du Maurier says, lifting her chin, “He is very likable, isn’t he? Successful, socialized, and refreshingly…sane.”

Hannibal thinks that one day Du Maurier will tread upon the hallowed ground that is Will one time too many.

“Sanity is a relative term at best. But, perception is a tool that is pointed at both ends.”

“No doubt good advice for the psychiatrist, practicing or not.”

“For anyone.” Hannibal adds.

Du Maurier turns her attention to the display of gold and silver bracelets. She watches Hannibal cross to the other side of the walk way, turning his head this way and that, deceptively unassuming and unbearably smug.

Du Maurier suspects Hannibal finds Clayton far more alluring than he will ever let on as she had hoped he would. Hannibal’s person suit is still frayed, its seams still unstitched. Hannibal forgets she can see him, but Du Maurier is ever aware.

Clayton shares only a physical likeness to Graham, not his madness. Still, Hannibal will gorge himself on that likeness, and he will begin to covet what he sees, and he will draw Clayton into his mythical narrative. He cannot help himself now that he has been captivated by his new muse. He will be preoccupied with Clayton and the next couple of weeks will pass quickly.

Du Maurier’s careful planning is finally coming to fruition. She is confident Hannibal will transfer the agreed upon assets.

Her contact, Levin, works for Banque Suisse, and he has access to their account balances and interest. Nothing has been touched. Du Maurier had been checking on the balance nearly daily, but that had been more about sending Hannibal a message than to assuage concerns. Du Maurier had been content to chat with the pleasant young woman who often took her mid-morning calls. She does not call so often now. Their account cannot be accessed online for security reasons and this too has its benefits.

She keeps her contact with Levin limited; she does not want to compromise his employment. He is far too valuable to lose should his superiors question frequent contact between them.

It is Levin who will let Du Maurier know when Hannibal makes the transfer. If Hannibal had her code, he would have made a move by now. He would have moved against her before meeting

Clayton. He would not have needed her to authorize the transfer of funds and assets if he could simply take it all.

A total withdrawal of assets requires the transaction be done in person. Only one of them has to be present, but both codes must be offered, along with proof of death of the other. Verification takes days. Hannibal has not left the country, so Du Maurier is satisfied that everything is as it should be.

Hannibal is far too invested in finding Graham to be concerned about their joint account. He won't leave Florence because he wants Graham to find him. He had not mentioned their investments the last two years he had lived in Baltimore, too caught up in playing consultant for the FBI and too enamored with Graham to bother.

He had only become concerned after being summarily dismissed as her patient. Du Maurier has looked over the paperwork and the deeds to the Chesapeake properties with her lawyer and all seems to be in order. No, she thinks, Hannibal intends to find Graham one way or another, and he believes that when he does, he and Graham together will somehow manipulate her into giving up her code.

Hannibal likely fantasizes about it all the time. Du Maurier glances at him as he looks out over the Arno at the sun bathers floating on their little boats. She smiles at him from beneath her hat.

As soon as Hannibal transfers those funds, Levin will intercept Hannibal's code and then…Du Maurier can send in the dogs, and Graham. Hannibal will drown in his own self-congratulation as he lay in a pool of his own blood at Graham's feet. Or, Graham will be the one lying in a pool of blood while Hannibal stands over him in handcuffs courtesy the FBI or Interpol.

Either way, Du Maurier can leave Siena, leave Fiesole, leave Florence, and leave Hannibal and Graham to the fate that awaits them. She will be on a plane to Switzerland. And she will walk into Banque Suisse and she will clear out the entire account right under Hannibal's nose. She has already prepared the death notice in Hannibal's alias, the identity he assumed for the account at Banque Suisse for the local papers in anticipation of Hannibal's imminent demise…or arrest.

A life without regret is no life at all. Du Maurier has plenty of regrets, but this will not be one of them. She regrets that she must resort to such excess to protect her interests. She regrets that Hannibal could not let his life in Baltimore go. That he could not let go of Graham. That the Hannibal she once knew is gone from her.

She glances again at Hannibal standing in profile, his handsome face bathed in sunlight, chiseled features as beautiful as carved granite and equally immovable. There is one thing she will miss when she boards her flight to Switzerland.

She will have to miss the look on Hannibal's face when he finds Graham, not Clayton waiting for him in what promises to be a brilliant display of persuasion and cunning. Clayton will be dead and Graham will assume it was Hannibal who killed him. She regrets she will not see the granite crumble.

Doctor Clayton is the unwitting lure. If Hannibal finds Clayton intriguing now, it won't be long before Hannibal becomes possessive of him. Whimsy. Clayton is also the lynchpin. Without him, she cannot bait Hannibal. Without him, she cannot frame Graham.

Du Maurier starts at the gentle caress of her shoulder. She turns to find Hannibal standing once again beside her.

“Penny for your thoughts?” He says.

Du Maurier holds up two bracelets, one gold and one silver. “Which do you like?”

Hannibal examines each for a moment. He flicks Du Maurier’s nose lightly with his finger. “I think the better merchandise is inside.”

She smiles and drops them back into the tray. “A nickel for yours then.”

“I’ve been thinking, about your new puppy analogy. Doctor Clayton is not Will, but I think it fortuitous that you met him. I find his company…therapeutic.”

“Is that a thank you, Hannibal?”

“I suppose it is. Have you been to his office?”

“No, actually. Why?” Du Maurier brushes her hair from her cheek still unnerved by Hannibal’s silent approach.

“He aligns his philosophy of psychiatry with the décor, very impressive. I am not aware of any psychiatrist who has taken the concept of office feng shui to such a dramatic degree.”

“Really? Perhaps an opportunity will present itself.” Du Maurier says as she checks her watch.

“You have not already created an opportunity?”

Hannibal notices the way Du Maurier’s fingers linger about the gemstones on either side of the watch face. He does not miss the slight twitching of her lips.

Du Maurier turns to look up at Hannibal, the hat casting her face in shadow. Her eyes are as blue and friendly as the summer skies above.

“Well, for now at least, his therapy with Lydia includes dogs. He doesn’t engage in canine therapy at his office location.”

“Where does he take his patients? He has his own kennel?”

“No, he works with shelters and vets in the area and brings the dogs with him on location. I am actually looking forward to it.”

“As I look forward to my next appointment.” Hannibal says, his hand pressing warmly on the small of her back as he guides her into the jewelry shop.

Since Du Maurier is not returning to Siena before the weekend, Hannibal is certain he will be able to find her, and Clayton, at the winery and estate on the outskirts of Fiesole, where Lydia resides. Hannibal doubts Du Maurier would meet Clayton and his dogs in one of the parks in Fiesole. Her wealthy client wouldn’t agree to therapy in public and neither would Clayton suggest it.

Du Maurier’s intentions regarding Clayton require a controlled environment such as the guest quarters provided to her by Lydia’s family. Where else could she recreate her fantasy in the hot tub? Hannibal thinks perhaps her accommodations may very well include a hot tub.

Clayton had said his session with Lydia was Saturday. Hannibal wonders if Clayton has any idea what Du Maurier is capable of. Perhaps he does. He may even like hot tubs.

Hours later, back in Impruneta, Hannibal reclines in front of his pool basking in the brightness of the Tuscan sun that never fails to invigorate him. He never tires of feeling the sensuous warmth on his face and limbs. The heat seems to permeate his very soul. The sun and this garden have been the only things keeping his soul from wilting completely.

His phone rings and Hannibal reaches around the chaise lounge to retrieve it from the table. He sits up straight to take the call from his cousin.

"Roberta…what a pleasant surprise."

"Ah yes," Roberta laughs lightly into the phone, "well the pleasure is mine. I have some news for you about our mutual friends."

"I'm all ears."

"Luciano and Lucia Paolini are distant cousins of your Carlo and Matteo, the exact relationship does not matter except that you did invite something of a vendetta. Apparently Mason Verger's handling of whatever altercation resulted in their demise caused some backlash that was mitigated only by his unfortunate accident…and his obscenely deep pockets. Verger is bent on destroying you by any means he can, Hannibal."

"I would expect nothing less of him. I think Mason a glutton for punishment. The sadist has become masochist…"

"Why not kill him outright when you had the opportunity to do so?"

"Mason is not worthy of the table. Besides, his death would have had serious repercussions for a member of his family. It was the least I could do to protect her interests."

"The sister."

"Yes. Who was also a patient."

"Oh, Hannibal, I think I see the relationships now. You meddled in something between them." Roberta chides him…affectionately.

"With a purpose. There were other considerations at the time. A convergence of destinies igniting in unison like multiple fuses."

Roberta will either comment or she will ruminate further. Hannibal is certain she investigated the matter quite thoroughly. She quickly decides on the former.

"Would one of those other considerations also be a former patient, a former FBI agent with brown hair and blue eyes?"

"He is, was…a consideration, yes."

"Which is it, Hannibal? Is or was?"

Hannibal chooses his words carefully, not because he shies from honesty with Roberta, but because choosing between the past and the present with regard to Will is not possible. Will is…eternal.

“The issue between the Vergers did extend to another former patient.”

“Ah…my dearest Hannibal. To hear you speak of him in such vague and clinical terms when he clearly means much more saddens me, as it must sadden you. Be thankful he cuts you still. Dissonance is a jewel unspoiled by familiarity.”

“So it is…” Hannibal says quietly.

Hannibal blinks back the single tear that threatens to spill from pale lashes. Roberta politely waits for him to compose himself, appreciating more than anyone how rare a thing for Hannibal to say so much with so few words.

“What other news have you to share?” he says after a moment.

“I had the twins followed and they made their rounds of older neighbors who might remember Saint Laurent as it was when Papa was alive and maybe before that. I am not certain what they learned or from whom. They also visited the Bibliothèque nationale among other libraries, the recorder of deeds, and several police precincts. I cannot say what they were able to send electronically, but I would imagine they gathered quite a lot for Mr. Verger to peruse.”

“You found no evidence of anyone else looking for me?”

“Well, you remain on the FBI’s most wanted list, but I could not find any active manhunt in progress. My friends in D.C. had no news on that particular front, either.”

Hannibal is not sure if he is relieved or disappointed that the list does not include Will. He thinks that any news of him would be preferable to none. It occurs to Hannibal that Will has been swallowed up in his inferno, licking his wounds, and drowning in the loathing and contempt that he finds in the bottom of every bottle he tosses to the floor wherever he is…

“Hannibal?”

“Yes, please continue.”

“If all goes as it appears, the Paolini’s will be en route to Rome from de Gaulle this evening. They should arrive at da Vinci at seven at the latest according to current flight information. They will likely stumble off the plane.”

“How’s that?”

“They made their rounds of the bars along Champs Elysees all afternoon. Their flight leaves from de Gaulle at 5:10. I have the airline and flight number.”

Hannibal writes down the information and glances at his watch. It is already past three.

“Cutting it a bit fine, aren’t you?” Hannibal says, knowing the drive to Rome will take almost three hours. Even in the Jaguar.

“I received a text while talking to you. I found out the flight just now. I suppose you need to make those dinner reservations, n’est-ce pas?”

“Roberta, you will forgive me if I end our conversation?”

“Of course. Please do let me know how dinner turns out. Did you ever look up the wine I suggested?”

“I did, two bottles in the cellar right now.”

Well, bon appétite. Au revoir, Hannibal.

Chapter End Notes

http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/tengu.shtml
for more info on Japanese Tengu
Karasu Tengu, 2nd Panel in 3-Panel Print by Kuniyoshi ukiyo-ewoodblockprints.com/samuraiprints.htm

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Link to specific print Will is looking at.

“Be grateful for anything that still cuts. Dissonance is a beauty that familiarity hasn't destroyed yet.”
A quote from Richard Powers' novel Orfeo that is the inspiration for Roberta's comments to Hannibal.

Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Hannibal arrives at da Vinci Fiumicino Airport and engages the twins. He has plenty of questions, but first things first; he has to get the twins back to Florence…in one piece. News of Will is the last thing Hannibal expected hear. Will is in Florence!

Luciano perks up a little in his slimy chair. His tired brown eyes stare into Hannibal's and he lowers his head, conspiratorially.

"You want me to call him? Maybe get him to meet you someplace. You want to finish the job on him, eh?"

Hannibal blinks. Will is…here?

Hannibal's eyes narrow slightly as he reminds himself, repeatedly, that Luciano's brain is only as large as the cranium that cradles it. Clearly, Luciano's loyalty to Mason Verger has fled the coop. One less obstacle to remove.

"Mr. Graham is in Italy?"

"For months now. He is in Florence, waiting for that." Luciano inclines his head toward the stack of documents and notes. Will is in Florence.

Chapter 46

Hannibal arrives at da Vinci Fiumicino Airport and engages the twins. He has plenty of questions, but first things first; he has to get the twins back to Florence…in one piece. News of Will is the last thing Hannibal expected hear. Will is in Florence!

da Vinci Fiumicino sprawls over several miles and is situated on the Mediterranean side of Italy near the coast some distance from the city of Rome, though the ride by rail is barely a half hour to the heart of the Eternal City where Termini Station is located across from the Baths of Diocletian. Hannibal's excursions to Rome have been far and few between, but he has had occasion to sample the local cuisine.

Hannibal has enjoyed the view along the coast as he had driven south from Impruneta. The route is sprinkled with castles and villages that recall Italy as it was centuries ago. He leaves the rustic countryside in his rearview mirror and focuses on his approach to Fiumicino, the former name of the airport before the renaming to da Vinci. Romans typically refer to it by its traditional name.

He hums to *Rigoletto,* Verdi's opera of curse and sacrifice, as he slows the Jaguar to follow the signs to the terminals for the arriving flights. He is familiar with Fiumicino and knows from which terminal the twins will emerge after claiming their baggage. The twins will not return to Florence by rail. They have too much luggage.

Besides hunting for Hannibal, they had indulged themselves along Champs Elysees on a shopping spree that no doubt divested Mason of countless euros. They are both ruthless and rude Hannibal sniffs.

They will either secure a taxi, or rent a car. Hannibal thinks the latter is more probable. They are creatures of habit, their furtive nature inescapable, and Hannibal reasons they would find a rental under assumed names better suited to their clandestine activities.

Since they flew out from Florence, there will be no car waiting for them in a parking garage in Rome. According to Roberta they purchased the tickets on a whim likely without thinking much further than arriving in Rome. Hannibal thinks they would balk at family picking them up. They would have to behave themselves. Crime family or not, no Catholic would condone the sordid conduct of this brother and sister. They have been inebriated all day and Hannibal imagines they slept the entire flight. They will rent a car without a second thought.

Why would they give anything a second thought? They are complacent in their surroundings and all of Italy is their playground.

Verger is very persuasive, at least his bank account is. Verger is also smart to appease the family. Hannibal thinks the family means to protect its honor, such as it is. They would wish to retain the Sardinian reputation of familial solidarity rather than the perception that the family can be bought. Their services may go to the highest bidder, but Sardinian pride when it comes to family should have no price.

Hannibal knows how eagerly Mason wants to repay him for the therapy he received. Mason would not permit anyone to rob him of his revenge if he could help it.

He pulls the Jaguar into the rental lot and climbs out, pops open the trunk so it is slightly ajar and leaves the vehicle unlocked. His shirt and pants fit snugly, no loose fabric to grab and he wears all black. The trunk has been lined with plastic. In his belt is tucked a syringe, and he carries two linoleum knives, one in his back pocket, the other concealed in a sock.

He walks briskly across the lot with purpose. He does not have to wait long. As he hoped, the twins are also making their way across the lot, activating the headlights of their vehicle as they approach. They will invariably ask themselves what might have happened had they booked a different flight. They will not be alive long enough to worry about it.

The man, Luciano, is short in stature and barrel chested, his massive shoulders hunched forward as he swaggers across the pavement his sister at his side. She is dark and porcine like her brother although her sizable chest is not shaped like a barrel. Were it not for the family trait of heavy jowls, she might be considered pretty. Brother and sister share the same wide nose that Hannibal cannot help but associate with the snouts of the pigs in Mason's barn.

"I believe you have the wrong car." Hannibal says in Italian as he moves to stand behind Lucia, his hands grasping the flesh and muscle of her bicep.

"Aye! What do you know?" Luciano halts as Hannibal continues to pull Lucia away from him. There is considerable distance between them before Luciano notices that his sister is being held in Hannibal's arms. He takes a step forward and reaches for the knife he carries inside his jacket.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Hannibal says holding Lucia close.

Luciano stops. His eyes grow wide as his cognitive functions kick in, and Hannibal watches as the light of recognition begins to appear in Luciano’s eyes, though dimly at first. Luciano’s jaw drops as he lowers the knife.

“I understand you have been looking for me, in all the wrong places, apparently.” Hannibal says as he draws the blade lightly across Lucia’s ribcage. He draws no blood but he makes his point.

Lucia’s body stiffens and Hannibal can feel her heart thudding wildly in her chest.

“Let her go. Take me instead.”

“Now, Luciano, may I call you Luciano? Good. You know I can’t do that.”

“You would hurt a woman?”

“Tsk Tsk” Hannibal tuts, “If she is being paid to kill me I would. Wouldn’t you? I won’t hurt her unless you make me. Are you intending to make me?”

Luciano shakes his head. He looks around the lot, probably hoping for a camera. Hannibal knows the camera can only see Luciano from this angle. Hannibal and Lucia are not facing the camera.

“He has a knife Luciano! Listen to him.”

“He will kill us anyway…”

“If you will follow me to my car we can resolve this quickly.” Hannibal says pressing the flat edge of the knife against the thin fabric of Lucia’s shirt that rides up over her bejeweled belly button.

Luciano swallows but nods his head at Hannibal.

“The information you found, where is it?”

“In my bag…bastardo.” Lucia says as she glances at the carry on that hangs from her shoulder.

“Let’s not be rude.”

Hannibal strokes her neck with the pads of his fingers. She quiets to the touch of pressure to her jugular. Hannibal looks to Luciano.

“Unlock the trunk and place your luggage inside. Take the tags off and place them in your pockets.”

Luciano does as Hannibal says keeping his movements slow. He slams the trunk lid down, loudly and with marked frustration.

“Very good. Take a deep breath and exhale, go ahead… Put the keys in your pocket. Now, walk in front and we’ll follow. Quickly now, but not too quickly, there…yes like that.”

Hannibal guides him from the rear as he holds the increasingly sober Lucia closely at his side as though helping her walk. Soon enough they arrive at Hannibal’s Jaguar. Hannibal opens the rear car door and invites Lucia to get inside. As she ducks her head, Hannibal sinks the syringe into her neck and she goes limp immediately.

Luciano stumbles forward then pauses, unsure if he should rush Hannibal. Hannibal watches, holding up the dazed and soon to be unconscious Lucia waiting for Luciano to stop thinking with his lizard brain. It takes but a couple seconds for Luciano to move past his flight or fight response and begin to think things through.

Hannibal opens the trunk and places Lucia inside. He closes it with a gentle thud.

“There are no cameras in this part of the lot, Luciano. Please, join me in the front seat, and ride shotgun I believe is the colloquialism.”

Luciano reluctantly climbs into the car and folds into his seat with quiet resignation. Hannibal notices the constant wetting of his lips and the tremors in his limbs. Luciano is now fully aware of the situation he and his sister have found themselves.

They are soon headed back north, toward Florence and Impruneta. Hannibal fortunately has a guest room always at the ready for surprise dinner guests. Luciano stares out the window, subdued and silent. Hannibal had offered him the current issue of *Bon Appétite* in Italian from the assortment of magazines he had thoughtfully provided for the ride, but Luciano had refused; eyes wide and mouth slack. Hannibal had shrugged and turned up the music. He switches from Verdi in favor of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.

Back at his villa, Hannibal watches Luciano awaken; his body slumps over the chair like a sack of spoiled fruit. He has fouled himself, too relaxed by the drugs he imbibed to hold his bodily functions. Hannibal removed his boots and jeans, but left him his underclothes and muscle shirt. His wrists and ankles are tied down and as Luciano lifts his head up to finally gaze about, Hannibal walks into his line of vision.

Scarlatti’s Sonata in F minor fills the room. Hannibal thought Luciano might appreciate listening to an Italian composer.

“You are waking from a mild sedative I injected into the water bottle. Necessary I’m afraid. The location of my home must remain undisclosed. You understand, don’t you Luciano?”

Luciano nods slowly, his eyes following Hannibal’s as best he can.

“Where is my sister?” He says slowly, tongue rolling across tobacco stained teeth.

“She’s in the trunk.”

“Porco cazzo…” Luciano mutters, his limbs constricting against the ropes.

“Comparing me to pig genitalia is rather like calling the kettle black, isn’t it, Luciano?”

Hannibal leans in closer. His nostrils twitch with the odor emanating from Luciano, fetid and strong almost biting in its potency. Hannibal detects wine, garlic, and…escargot.

“She is still sedated and in no danger…at the moment.”

“What do you want?” Luciano licks at his dry lips, but his tongue is as sticky and dehydrated as the rest of his mouth.

“You were approached by Mason Verger to find me?”

“Why ask me…what you already know?”

“Clarification. Answer the question.”

“Che cazzo! I want to see my sister.” He stiffens against the bindings.

“Of course you do. I am willing to reciprocate small kindnesses in exchange for information. Were you hired by Mason Verger to find me?”

“Yes.” Luciano twists miserably in his chair, his restraints quite secure.

“But your family wants me dead, too. For Matteo and Carlo.”

“Yes.”

“So you took Verger’s money to do something you were going to do anyway?”

“My family work for him a long time. We let him pay for it. He needed eyes on the ground in Italy. He…can’t move, right?”

“Not much, no.”

Luciano studies Hannibal for a moment. His mouth twists into an ugly grimace, his imagination trying to picture a Mason he has never seen. Hannibal asks the questions foremost on his mind.

“How long have you and your sister worked for Mr. Verger?”

“Maybe four months or so.”

“So, you were searching for me before he sent you out of country?”

“Yeah”

“Where did you search?”

“Here… in Italy.”

“Why search in Italy?”

Luciano is quiet. Hannibal allows him time to reason through his options. If Luciano thinks the information valuable he will likely try and use that information as a bargaining chip.

Hannibal picks up the files Lucia had in her Gucci carry on and peruses the documents. They had managed to collect a substantial amount of information on him and his cousin. Not all of it damaging, but revealing nonetheless. He would like to read Lucia’s notes from the interviews she took, but he will have to stay his curiosity for the moment.

Hannibal looks back to Luciano. He lifts his head to let Hannibal know there is fight left in him yet, but to Hannibal he is dead already.

“How did Mr. Verger know to search in Italy?” Hannibal crosses his legs and leans back against the chair. He waits. Luciano takes a breath.

“He said he had a tip from the FBI. Someone saw you board a plane to Paris. But the search stopped in Paris. Dead end.”

“You are protecting your source, Luciano. The FBI search stopped in Paris months ago. Why Italy?” Hannibal says as he stares coldly into Luciano’s face.

Luciano’s eyes wander to the right before he answers. “I do my job, eh? I don’t ask questions. Mr. Verger knows lots of people. I don’t know who he talks to.”

Luciano had used his right hand when he had gone for the knife. When right-handed people lie; their eyes shift to the right because the left side of their brains controls imagination. If Luciano were telling the truth, his eyes would have moved left, where memory would register. Hannibal imagines Luciano must never see the world from the left.

“I think you do. Let’s find out shall we?”

Hannibal glances at the metal table adjacent to Luciano. Luciano’s eyes alight on the table and Hannibal leans forward to pull the sheet back to reveal the assortment of surgical instruments assembled neatly upon it. Luciano jerks in his chair.

“Be calm, Luciano. These are not meant for you.”

Luciano’s eyes grow larger still as the implication sinks in.

“Do the names Du Maurier or Dumont mean anything to you?”

Luciano continues to stare dully at Hannibal. He sighs and shakes his head. Hannibal asks the question he knows he must.

“Does the name Will Graham mean anything to you?”

Luciano’s pupils dilate immediately. The wound Will carved out of his heart begins to throb in Hannibal’s chest. He closes his eyes for a moment before he speaks.

“He is an acquaintance of both myself and Mr. Verger.”

Luciano’s face stills and he stares at Hannibal wide-eyed, unblinkingly wide-eyed. Hannibal ponders Luciano’s stunned expression. Luciano is obviously confused. Hannibal picks up Luciano’s phone where it lay on the stainless steel table next to the surgical instruments. Hannibal turns on the phone and places it within reach of Luciano’s fingers.

“Enter your password, please.”

“What are you going to do with my sister? If I am awake, she…she should be waking up soon, eh?”

“Oh, I’m quite sure she is awake already. I will bring her down presently.” Hannibal continues to hold out the phone to Luciano.

Luciano swallows and presses the key pad to unlock his phone. Hannibal begins to scroll through the contacts. He stares at Will’s name among Luciano’s contacts. His left eye tics, activating memories that cascade in a torrent. Several scenarios begin to play through Hannibal’s mind, but he needs more information. Whatever the arrangement with Will, Hannibal should tread lightly. He does not want Luciano to gush what he thinks Hannibal wants to hear to save his sister. Because Luciano clearly believes he still can.

“You should have told me, Luciano. Your sister’s fate is now non-negotiable.”

“NO! Wait…I will tell you whatever you want to know about him…only don’t hurt my sister. If you hurt either of us, my family will find you. This will never end.”

“Your family is of little or no consequence to me, Luciano. Tell me about Will Graham.”

“And my sister?”

Hannibal glides his thumb across Will’s name on the little screen as though he could summon him, like the genie in the lamp. Luciano will do anything Hannibal wants. His sister is his Achilles’ heel. Everyone has one.

“Tell me about Will Graham, and I will bring her down to join you…alive.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been here all along! He was right… What do you want to know?” Luciano is almost whining as he shifts in his chair, his skin chaffing from his soiled underclothes.

“Why is his phone number in your contacts?”

“He works for Mr. Verger, too. He tells us where to look to…find you.”

Hannibal’s expression does not change. Hannibal thinks this an odd working relationship. Perhaps Will licks his wound at the Verger estate…with Margot, unwilling to subject himself to more intimate contact with Hannibal. But why would Will help Mason? A better question is why Mason would accept Will’s help.

“This number is current?”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time you talked to him? Be truthful, Luciano. I can check your call history.”

“This afternoon, before we left Paris. Lucia called him to let him know we were leaving.”

“Did she tell him what you found?”

“No. We were, uh, busy, you know…at a café.”

“A café? Really, Luciano.”

“Aye, merda! A bar, ok? A bar. She told him we were coming in tonight and would call him in a couple days. We are supposed to be visiting family…That’s all she told him.”

Luciano perks up a little in his slimy chair. His tired brown eyes stare into Hannibal’s and he lowers his head, conspiratorially.

“You want me to call him? Maybe get him to meet you someplace. You want to finish the job on him, eh?”

Hannibal blinks. *Will is…here*?

Hannibal's eyes narrow slightly as he reminds himself, repeatedly, that Luciano's brain is only as large as the cranium that cradles it. Clearly, Luciano's loyalty to Mason Verger has fled the coop. One less obstacle to remove.

"Mr. Graham is in Italy?"

"For months now. He is in Florence, waiting for that." Luciano inclines his head toward the stack of documents and notes. *Will is in Florence.*

Luciano has no idea where he is right now. He knows only what he saw out of the car window before he gulped down the bottled water twenty minutes into their ride. He has no idea how close to Florence they are.

"This arrangement you have with Mr. Graham…how does it work?"

Hannibal listens while Luciano explains the relationships between Verger, himself, and Will. Luciano tells him that Mason had insisted Will take on the twins as assistants. That Mr. Graham was not stable and required…looking after.

Hannibal thinks of his last meeting with Mason. Mason had been in an alternate reality, but there had been something he had said while in his drugged out semi-lucid state when Will had arrived to find Mason squatting in a chair in his living room.

I adopted some dogs from the shelter. I had them in a cage together with no food and fresh water. One of them died hungry. The other had a warm meal. I should have put you in a cage with Dr. Lecter. I'm curious what would've happened.

What are you feeding my dogs?

Hannibal's eyes flicker with the realization that Mason wants both them. He wants to repay both of the men responsible for his ruined body, for empowering Margot within the scope of his father's narrow and misogynist will.

Mason wants to recreate the scene on the platform in his barn, or something similar. Act two, Hannibal thinks, Mason tries again. But he isn't going to trust Will this time. He hired the twins to keep an eye on Will. It is abundantly clear to Hannibal that Luciano and Lucia are to do more than keep an eye on Will. Mason knows exactly what kind of unstable Will is.

The twins appear to report directly to Will, running investigations and expenses on his authority. It had been Will's idea to send them to Lithuania and he had left it to Luciano to convince Mason to fund the fishing expedition. Hannibal thinks Mason would not have left Will on his own in Florence without his Sardinian chaperones. Will must not talk to Mason directly much at all. They use the twins to communicate.

"Luciano?"

Luciano rolls his head to one side. "What now?"

"You did not tell Mr. Verger the truth about leaving Italy, did you?"

Luciano wriggles in his chair, he avoids looking at Hannibal.

“That’s alright, Luciano. What did you tell him? You aren’t supposed to leave Mr. Graham alone for too long are you?”

Luciano shakes his head.

“But you and your sister really wanted to take a vacation didn’t you?”

“We like clubbing. There was nothing going on in Florence. Graham suggested we try something new. Mr. Verger would have said no…he would have wanted Graham to go with us.”

“And Mr. Graham doesn’t approve of your…amore, does he?” Hannibal brushes his hand over Luciano’s closely cropped scalp as Luciano shakes his head again, lowers his eyes.

“You spent your own money, then?”

“Ah, no. We told Mr. Verger that Graham was with us. He never find out.”

“Thank you, Luciano. That was very helpful.” Hannibal says, his thoughts coming together, like puzzle pieces falling into place.

What Mason is experiencing isn't restricted to reality, so reality has to be forced to adapt.

Mason intends to force his own reality upon both Will and Hannibal. He is using Will. Hannibal thinks Will is using Mason, aware that Mason intends to kill him. Will would find the twins easy enough to manipulate. Perhaps he had sent them to Lithuania to test Mason. For whatever reason, Will did not want to go himself. And he did not want to lie to Mason. If anything went wrong, it would be Luciano, not Will who seemed duplicitous.

Will has to be aware of Mason’s design.

Will probably told Mason that he wants revenge on Hannibal. Mason probably told Will that all he wanted was Hannibal, that if Will caught him, all would be forgiven. Will accepted Verger’s money because he is unemployed, and the FBI won’t touch him. Will is trying to find him with the only means available to him. But what are his true intentions?

Hannibal is impressed with the depths of Will’s deceit. It would be smart of Will to keep close to Mason. That is exactly what Hannibal would do. Will is using Mason as he had used Jack and the FBI.

Hannibal thinks perhaps that is not an entirely fair comparison. Will had genuinely cared about Jack. Will had felt plenty guilty doing end runs around Jack. Jack was the little angel on Will’s shoulder. Mason is no angel. Will would have no problem running circles around Mason.

Mason’s exploiting of Will is not much different than how Jack and the FBI had exploited him. Will had been unemployed when he had resumed his therapy. Released from BSHCI only days before, Will’s professional career was in ruins. Only the FBI could rehabilitate it provided they even wanted to. Will had been expendable. After Hannibal’s escape, Will had learned just how expendable. He is expendable now.

Had he been caught, the FBI would have rewarded Will by charging him with the murder of Tier and charging him with accessory to multiple murders. The forensic evidence in Hannibal’s house could have supported any story the FBI wanted to spin to protect its own interests. They would both be sitting in cells at BSHCI at Frederick's mercy. Chilton was another matter Hannibal would like to discuss with Will.

Can you explain my actions? Can you posit my intentions? What would be your theory of my mind?

I have an understanding of your state of mind. You understand mine. We're just alike. This gives you the capacity to deceive me and be deceived by me.

Hannibal's understanding of Will's state of mind has been incomplete. It still is. Hannibal sighs. Perception is indeed a tool pointed at both ends. And perhaps, a teacup shattered by deception cannot gather itself back up.

The only difference between the FBI and Mason is that Mason means to kill Will once Will finds him. What does Will mean to do once he finds him? What are his intentions this time? So unpredictable, his Will.

Please. Every moment of cogent thought under your psychiatric care is a personal victory.

You're applying yourself to my perspective as I've been applying myself to yours.

You're right. We are just alike. You're as alone as I am. And we're both alone without each other.

Their capacity to deceive each other extended even to their shared loneliness. Each of them felt it acutely. They had exploited each other's loneliness, each trying to gain advantage over the other. Will had exploited Hannibal's loneliness as a means to get close enough to trap him. And Hannibal had systematically alienated Will from relationships that were not good for him. Relationships he did not need.

You don't want me to have anything in my life that's not you.

I only want what's best for you.

Will had accused him of fostering codependency.

Is that what I'm doing?

Will had offered him friendship. And believing Will's offer had been genuine, Hannibal had alienated Will, had tried to make it easier for him to leave, knowing that eventually they would have to leave Baltimore. Loneliness had left them vulnerable to each other's manipulations, but at the end of the day, they *are* alone without each other.

Will is alone, and though he might still insist that abandonment requires expectation, his own actions have left him abandoned. He has no one.

Neither does Hannibal. Not really.

There is truth embedded in their deceptions. Is Will seeing that truth or is he chasing ghosts?

Will is in Florence not for revenge or justice or any of the other reasons he may be telling himself. He is here because he is missing a piece of himself. And Hannibal has been waiting for him because Hannibal is missing a piece, too.

I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it.

Didn't I?

Hannibal thinks that perhaps, he might have been a little hasty about that. He had cut Will free but the bond remains, as frightening for Will as a shadow suspended on dust, and as tempting as a promise perched upon penitent lips. This new development casts an entirely different light upon events, then and now. It may be possible to gather up that shattered teacup. They are just alike. And they have a common enemy.

Luciano is leaning forward in the chair. He looks like he may be sick. Hannibal glances at the large round metal drain beneath Luciano's chair. If Luciano vomits, Hannibal will hose it down with the rest of the offal that continues to waft from Luciano. All in good time, Hannibal has a suit for that unpleasantness.

"Mr. Verger has plans for me and for Mr. Graham, doesn't he?"

Luciano looks aside, to his right. He rolls his eyes at Hannibal, indecision puckers between his eyebrows like a furry mountain.

"Luciano…"

Luciano's shoulders slump as he nods, his chin nearly touching his chest.

"Good boy. Luciano? Look at me. That's better. Do you know where Mr. Graham lives?"

"Yeah, he live in a swanky palazzo off Via dei Benci…compliments Mr. Verger."

Hannibal smiles. Will lives about ten minutes from Palazzo Pitti. Will has been ten minutes from him since…"

"And when did Mr. Graham start working with you?"

"Must be four months now. We met him at Peretola. Mr. Verger make it very clear that Mr. Graham was not to be trusted. But…he is no problem. He keep to himself."

"He has given you no reason not to trust him."

Luciano shrugs. "He is always where he says he gonna be. He calls us. We call him. We work well together." Luciano shrugs again and looks up at Hannibal. "Mr. Verger is weird. He talks weird."

"It's fine to be weird…most of the time." Hannibal says.

Four months… Hannibal thinks. Four months Hannibal has been walking the Vasari Corridor mere minutes from Will. Hannibal thinks Du Maurier would have good reason to worry if she knew. Hannibal can enact his plan anytime now, as soon as he finds Will…

He walks to the far side of the little room; its cream colored walls seem to swallow up the sound of his footsteps as he walks. He returns to Luciano bearing a chair. He faces it forward and sets it next to Luciano. Hannibal begins to pull on a plastic suit and rubber gloves.

"Hey, uh, what are you doing now?" Luciano asks with a quiver in his voice as he angles his head around trying to track Hannibal's movements.

“Oh, I am about to let your sister out of the trunk of my car. But first…” Hannibal pauses as he retrieves a hose and turns on the spigot. “I need to water the pigs.”

Luciano braces himself for the blast of ice cold water. Hannibal sprays the young Sardinian until he is quite drenched and uncomfortable, but clean. Discomfort is a state he will come to know intimately. Hannibal leaves him to sit while he retrieves the sister who is likely thumping against the lid of the Jaguar’s trunk with bruised and bloodied fists.

Less than half an hour later, Hannibal is driving toward Florence and Via dei Benci. The brother and sister sit cold and wet together in the guest room. He does not intend to engage Will, not yet. He simply needs to see him; to know he is there.

As he turns the steering wheel and rounds the corner, Hannibal slows the Jaguar as his mind absorbs the scene before him. Will is not here.

Hannibal pulls up to the burned out remains of the only palazzo to use Via dei Benci as its mailing address according to Luciano. His description of the palazzo had been accurate, or at least until recently. Luciano had said that Lucia had been to Will’s apartment on the second floor only once. The side of the building where Will ‘s apartment had been, is completely ruined. The structure is still cordoned off, no doubt structurally unsound, its supports exposed and its foundation unleveled by the heat.

Will had miraculously escaped certain death or he had not been here when it happened. The twins clearly do not know the palazzo caught fire. They have been in Europe for at least two weeks. Hannibal remembers the day he had seen the smoke rising across the highway. That would have been about the time they had left Florence. Will must not have informed them that he moved. So infuriating…his Will.

Hannibal turns the Jaguar around and drives back to Impruneta and the twins. He remembers reading the fire had been deemed tragically accidental. One fatality. He wonders if Mason had set the fire. Hannibal dismisses the idea. Mason thinks Will went with the twins. It is highly unlikely Mason suspects anything or he would not have footed the bill for the excursion.

And yet, Hannibal cannot banish the feelings of misgiving. It does seem strange that a building that has withstood centuries suddenly catches fire while Will resides there. If Will had wanted to move to a location unassociated with Mason, he would not have resorted to arson to do so. A killer he may be, but his empathy would not permit him to sacrifice innocent life.

The fire may have been an accident. Or, there is something else at work Hannibal cannot yet see. But he will.

An hour later, Hannibal sits on the veranda enjoying his moonlit garden while sipping at a favorite piquant Sauvignon Blanc. He had shared this particular vintage with Will, more than once and its flavor comes back full and rich upon his tongue. Will is in Florence.

The Sardinian wine recommended by Roberta sits collecting dust in the wine cellar. And there it will sit, like the twins until they have fulfilled their purpose. Lucia and Luciano have a part to play yet. Will is in Florence.

Will is not drinking himself into oblivion in some awful swamp in Louisiana fixing boat motors and licking his wounds. He has taken on Mason Verger and his Sardinians in order to find him. This does not mean that Will has left his Inferno. If Will remains trapped within his own circles of hell, then how appropriate it is that he has come here. The Divine Comedy was conceived by a son of Florence who wrote his epic poem in exile from his beloved city. Will is in exile, too.

Will is in Florence and Hannibal will find him.

Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Hannibal’s memory palace takes him back to the day Mason regrets ever meeting the good doctor and the sperm donor.

Will had licked his lips, a thoughtful and calculated gesture. He had angled his head to one side, feigning incredulity. “Is that what you would like to happen?”

Will’s fingers had found the ill-fitting jacket’s collar and he had pulled Hannibal near, had pressed his lips to Hannibal’s throat and they had been warm, so warm against his skin. Hannibal’s nostrils had been filled with the scent of him, the air alive with musk and madness. The brush of whiskers along his jaw had set alight the fire smoldering inside all evening.

“Like?” Hannibal had said softly, cradling Will’s head in his neck. “It is inevitable.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 47

Hannibal’s memory palace takes him back to the day Mason regrets ever meeting the good doctor and the sperm donor.

margot at verger mansion

Every creative act has its destructive consequence, Will. The Hindu god Shiva is simultaneous destroyer and creator. Who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today.

You sit in that chair, Will, as you have so many times before. It holds among its molecules the vibrations of all our conversations ever held in its presence.

Their conversations, like their destinies, have been flying and swimming steeped in blood and emptiness in Hannibal’s memory palace…until today. Today, destiny beckoned and tonight, while Hannibal lies in bed gazing at stars he knows that somewhere nearby Will is gazing at these same stars. Hannibal imagines he can feel Will plucking at the beating heart in his chest, ripping a melody from it, orchestrations of carbon…a symphony of sinew, bone and flesh and of light, air, and color.

Somewhere in Florence lies Will, fingers cradling his wound, Hannibal's mark upon flesh he had cradled and loved and would have again. The memories roll. They roil. They renew.

Hannibal turns over to lie on his back, his skin cool between the thin satin sheets. He hopes the Will of yesterday has been laid waste with his doubts.

I wanted to dispel your doubts once and for all.

My doubts about what?

Me. I want you to believe in the best of me, just as I believe in the best of you.

Will had not waded into his stream; so he cannot be the same man swimming in the blood of *that* destiny. Did his fall give rise to friend or foe? Worthy enemy or worthy companion?

In their therapy session, devastated consciences and sanctified lies had weighed too heavily on Will's moral scale, tipped the arrow too far south on his moral compass for him to reconcile. He had gazed at Hannibal with something close to contempt from his chair across the room, lips grim and tight and accusing. Will had not liked Hannibal's answer, then.

How many lies have had to be sanctified? How many consciences devastated?

As many as were necessary.

Will has apparently been doing what is necessary to adapt, evolve, and become since then. Will has been evolving…and resisting. He twists in his inferno and Hannibal knows what Will needs to set himself free. He needs another battle to test their friendship, another destiny already written in Hannibal's own hand. Hannibal needs to know his intentions.

Before his incarceration, Will had been averse to lying, most of all to his therapist. The entire concept of a lie repulsed him. That had been part of the reason he had despised Freddie Lounds. Once incarcerated, Will had found it within himself to manipulate those around him and had justified it as the cost of proving his innocence and Hannibal's guilt. But the cost had been too high. He lost people.

Upon his release, his seduction of Hannibal had required him to live a lie and to lie constantly to the people around him to keep up appearances. How it must have cost him to suffer Alana's accusations and utter rejection of him. And the deeper he had wandered into the maze of destruction and seduction the more lies he had to tell. Hannibal imagines Will spills lies now with the same ease and deliberation as he had sniffed and sipped his wine at Hannibal's table. Will has lied to himself most of all.

Will's seduction of Hannibal had been his education. But for Lounds, Hannibal would have believed Will had succumbed to his conditioning and education. That had been Hannibal's design. He thinks now it may have been Will's as well.

He may have accepted Hannibal's blade as penance, but Will had not crawled up on his cross to die. Will embodies both saint and sinner. He has lost his innocence. He knows too much. He has seen too much. He has felt too much, too.

Will has always felt too much. Hannibal knows how Will can become overwhelmed; unable to build his forts fast enough to accommodate the waves of associations his gift sends crashing into his mind. Hannibal cannot begin to fathom the emotional typhoon that must have rained down on him, a cacophony of voices in the kitchen that fateful night. The noise in his mind and the pain from his wound must have been terrible for him.

He had been in agony.

And Hannibal had left him drowning in that agony. Hannibal turns again in his bed. He had been so sure Will had deserved his punishment, his sentence for betraying him. Now, Hannibal is not sure. Hannibal has never been unsure of anything. The thought rankles.

I wanted to surprise you; and you… You wanted to surprise me.

Hannibal cannot undo what he has done. He very much desires to gather up this singular teacup again. Hannibal twists in the sheets again, turning first this way, then that, a restless shark swimming, swimming in blood and emptiness.

Doctor Clayton seems to understand him. His understanding is compassionate, not exploitive. Talking about his loss with the young psychiatrist had been productive. Hannibal had felt…better. Hannibal had also enjoyed drawing information from the doctor about himself. He has missed his social contacts.

Though Hannibal doubts that Du Maurier intended for his sessions with Clayton to be truly therapeutic, Hannibal thinks his time with his new psychiatrist is well spent. Hannibal would like to know how much Clayton is capable of understanding. Hannibal thinks that it might be better if the focus of his therapy shift to…regret. Until he finds Will, he can play patient with Clayton to placate Du Maurier.

Hannibal will not be seeing Clayton until next week. Well, that's not entirely accurate. Clayton will not be seeing Hannibal until next week. He turns his thoughts back to Will and turns again to lie on his back, eyes closed his hand resting upon the smooth flesh of his stomach. He imagines Will doing the same, unable to think of nothing but Hannibal each and every time he touches himself.

Will lives to either seek his vengeance on Hannibal or to accept his destiny with Hannibal. First, Hannibal must help to liberate him from his inferno.

This situation with Mason has caused Hannibal to see their time together through a different lens. Hannibal closes his eyes to the stars as he remembers the night of Mason's *accident*. Will's thoughts and actions then might provide Hannibal with insight into his thoughts and actions now. Now that Mason Verger has returned to vex Hannibal, insect that he is.

Will had baited Mason; put the proverbial snare about Hannibal's neck.

Why did you tell Mason Verger I want to kill him?

I was curious what would happen…

Hannibal had suspected that Will had been laying a trap to appease an impatient Uncle Jack, but doing bad things to bad people had felt too good. And Mason had been very, very bad. The ambivalence Will had felt before Mason had tried to kill them both had departed by the time they had returned the ruined Mason home to his sister. Looking back, Hannibal thinks the messy business with Mason was a turning point for Will…

He's your patient, doctor. You do what you think is best for him.

Will had stood hands in pockets, a hint of a smile about his lips as Hannibal had snapped Mason's cervical vertebrae like a twig. The cracking of bone and the drop of Mason's head limp and useless onto the back of the blood soaked chair had been great theater for his audience of one. After wiping off his hands on Mason's shirt, he had rejoined Will to admire his handiwork.

"You uh, found my cd collection." Will had said glancing at his stereo, finally acknowledging Hannibal's carefully selected soundtrack for the afternoon's festivities.

"Hmmm. An eclectic assortment, no opera…but adequate. Music does enhance the mood." Hannibal had turned an ear toward the speaker as the next selection had started, a Mozart *Adante*.

"What do we do with him now?"

Will had frowned at Mason, lifeless drooling sack of bones, his ravaged face still slick with blood that continued to ooze from the vestiges of exposed muscle all over Will's chair. Will had missed Mason cutting the fatty tissue from his own cheeks. The dogs had really enjoyed that. By the time Will had arrived, Mason had been close to bone and might have started on his forehead or scalp.

Merciful that Will had arrived before Mason had plucked out his own eyes.

"How did you get here?" Hannibal had asked.

"I took a cab." Will had looked at Hannibal as though that should be perfectly obvious.

"I think I will do the same. May I use your phone?"

Hannibal would have liked to have taken a photograph of Will's face to frame. He might as well have slapped Will. He had stood with furrowed brows and lips parted unable to form a coherent thought for several seconds. But his dry wit had surfaced.

"Cash or credit? Or, will you just kill the cab driver?" His tone had been conversational, quiet as he had stood with feet slightly apart hands still in the pockets of his jacket.

"I suppose I could stay. Leaving you with two messes to clean up would be unforgivably rude." Hannibal had raised a brow as he had gazed at Will, his mouth caught between frown and grin.

"Incredibly rude." Will had scoffed as the drool had dripped from Mason's lipless maw.

"We will have to take him back. To Margot."

"You have a plan I take it?"

"Always."

Will had groaned softly, running his fingers through his hair and had looked with increasing concern at his dogs still sniffing around Mason and the bits of him on the carpet.

The dogs had begun to whine and Will had seemed to blink himself into the world of the mundane. He had knelt down to examine the dogs and his rug, moving Mason's feet aside to better survey the damage. He began to pluck the larger pieces of flesh from the fibers of the carpet presumably so the dogs wouldn't.

Hannibal had been surprised any of Mason remained on the rug with six dogs sniffing along the carpet. Will had dropped the bits of flesh into his palm, eyes distant and mouth drawn into a thin determined line. Hannibal had crossed the room to close the front door, still open to the front porch where another dog sat. Hannibal had left the door as it was and returned to Will who had been depositing the bits of Mason into an ashtray.

Hannibal had talked to Will's back as he had placed the ashtray on the mantle above the fireplace.

"Remind me to get that later."

"Certainly. Your dog, Winston is it? He's still…"

"I see him. I'm going to have to tear up the entire room. This…won't come out. I only just repaired the damage from…"

Will had turned around abruptly and leveled two very stony blue eyes at Hannibal. Hannibal had waited while Will had chewed at his lower lip in the most endearing way. A habit he had while he edited his words. Hannibal knew Will never said anything that was not deliberate. Like himself.

Murder is messy and there is always the inevitable cleaning up. A task that Will, fledgling killer that he was, had been finding increasingly tedious since his home had now become the scene of three crimes. Well, Hannibal had thought three at the time… Getting rid of evidence is necessary and ridding one's home of it happens more often than one would like. Practice makes perfect.

"This is the second time… you have desecrated my home." Will had said flatly, lifting his head in challenge, one predator to another.

"Maybe you should stop inciting patients to kill me in my own office." Hannibal had retorted to a slit mouthed Will. "You didn't desecrate your home with Lounds?"

Hannibal had never asked for details and thinks perhaps he should have. But, Will had likely made a bed of lies for that too.

"Hardly the same thing. Not even the same ballpark. You aren't going to try and convince me you were sanctifying it?" Will had said, just as flatly.

"No. Randall was worthy meat for the table. Mason is unworthy…to be anybody's bacon. Pity has no place at the table."

"You feel…pity? For Mason?" Will's eyes had widened, incredulous. He had glanced at the numb and unconscious Mason and his frown had deepened.

"Not Mason…Margot." Hannibal had said staring into cloudy blue eyes that had softened immediately.

"We make murder and mercy. Mercy does serve a higher purpose in this instance."

Will had looked about the mess in his living room. He had taken a deep breath and exhaled slowly, but had said nothing more.

Mason's body had quivered at that point with involuntary flatulence. What followed was equally involuntary but much more unpleasant.

“Did he just void his bowels…in my chair?”

“I believe so, yes.”

Will’s hands had knotted into fists, his jaw working from side to side as he had stared at the despoiled grotesque thing before him. Feeling Hannibal’s gaze, he had given Hannibal a mildly annoyed glance and had walked into the kitchen, stripped off his jacket and tossed it on the table. Hannibal had followed, Mason wasn’t going anywhere. He had watched Will roll up his sleeves and fill the sink with warm water and then squat down to root around in the cabinet underneath. Will had stood back up holding dishrags, old and faded but folded neatly.

“Before I do anything else, I have to clean the dogs up. It’s too cold outside to hose them down.”

“Of course.” Hannibal had said, understanding that Will would require a distraction in order to keep his mind occupied. “May I use your bathroom?”

Will had turned to look at Hannibal and seemed only then to notice the cuts on his face.

“Oh, there’s um…some peroxide, cotton balls, bandages, and…”

“It’s right down here?” Hannibal had pointed down the hall. Will had nodded and turned back to the sink already uncomfortable with the intimacy of Hannibal using his bathroom.

Hannibal had found the bathroom as neat and tidy as the kitchen. He had been here many times, not always with Will’s permission or knowledge and Will’s home had always been comfortable and clean. He had found the antiseptic and the cotton balls and had cleaned his wounds while Will had cleaned his dogs. He had looked in the mirror at his shirt, had found the cuffs soiled, bloodied, and had also realized that Will would have no shirts that would fit him. Will had taken to leaving clothes at his house, not the other way around.

Hannibal had removed his vest and shirt anyway. He had scrubbed at the cuffs and sleeves with cold water and hand soap, a combination that Hannibal had found to be very effective. Soon, the blood stains were gone, but the shirt was now wrinkled and quite wet. What was to be done about that?

By the time Hannibal had walked back to the kitchen, shirtless and smelling of deodorant soap, Will was still on his knees washing off the blood and bits of flesh tangled in the fur of the terrier, or what Hannibal thought was a terrier. Hannibal had stood observing Will with his dogs, his attention stubbornly focused on them, on anything but the sight of Mason in his living room.

The dogs were well trained Hannibal had to admit, each of them had sat still for Will to clean and rinse them off. When he had directed them to take their places in front of the fireplace they had each done exactly that once Will had been satisfied that no more of Mason remained to taint them.

He had glanced up at Hannibal, observed his lack of attire and the blue in his eyes had flickered a little brighter and his mouth had fallen open ever so slightly before returning his gaze to the furry little thing sitting in front of him. Hannibal had watched him try to blink away the color rising in his cheeks. Will had not retreated into his mind that evening, but he had exhibited his own brand of avoidance in his own quiet way.

“How did you get here, anyway?” Will had asked after an awkward moment.

“I drove what I imagine is Carlo’s flatbed truck. I found the keys in his pockets before he fed the pigs.”

“Good thing. Would have had a hell of a time getting them from him after.”

Will had continued with the dog grooming, but Hannibal had not missed his little smirk.

“We’re going to be here a while. Do you mind if I make some coffee?”

“Go ahead.” Will had said looking up for an instant. When Hannibal had not moved, Will had looked up again from his task. “What? Don’t tell me you don’t know where it is. You have been to my house before, probably more than I know.”

“Yes,” Hannibal had said patiently, “But not for coffee.”

Will had glanced at his fishing rods and fly tying table in the living room and had sighed rubbing his fingers over stubble and looking very tired all of sudden. “Middle cabinet, over there. Top shelf.”

“Perhaps you have an oversized shirt or jacket I might wear?”

Will had paused again, had raised his brows and peered at Hannibal beneath a fringe of curls still too short to Hannibal’s liking.

“I’ll look around when I’m done. Anything else?”

“No, I’ll make the coffee and check on Mason.” Hannibal had left Will alone after that, to finish with the dogs so he could have his undivided attention once again.

As the coffee had brewed, Hannibal had returned to stand over Mason. Mason’s breathing had been regular, his blood still coursing through the carotid artery as Hannibal had pressed his fingers aside his Adam’s apple. His vitals had been more or less acceptable considering his condition. Hannibal had brushed the unruly blonde mop with his fingers thinking his hair and his eyes were all that would be recognizable to him. Mason’s eyes had opened for a second, rolled up in his head and closed again. Satisfied, Hannibal had returned to the kitchen.

Will had been watching the dirty water swirling down the drain in a momentary daze and had looked to Hannibal as he had leaned over the sink hands on either side of the metal edges. Hannibal had wondered if Will thought of heaving up Abigail’s ear whenever he used his sink. Probably unavoidably.

Hannibal had moved to stand behind him, shifting so his hips brushed lightly along the curve of Will’s bottom, his belt buckle and zipper skimming the fabric of Will’s trousers and feeling the flex of muscle at the contact. Will had looked to the side waiting, seeking cues. Hannibal had grasped tense shoulders, had pressed his thumbs along knotted muscle. Will had leaned back into the gentle massage and Hannibal had welcomed the weight against him as Will settled, arching back so the scent of his hair filled Hannibal’s nose.

A second later Hannibal had been nuzzling his neck, eyes closed listening to Will breathe, fingers still kneading firm flesh and knowing his touch would keep Will from slipping away. He would be imagining Mason’s ordeal; he wouldn’t be able to help it. Hannibal would ask him later, but not now.

“It will take both of us to move him. He shouldn’t be sitting up like that, should he?” Will had asked, rolling his shoulders.

“It doesn’t matter now. Coffee’s ready.”

“So it is.”

Will had pressed against Hannibal folding into the curve of his body as though a part of him, arms still braced on either side of the sink, face still in profile as Hannibal had rested his cheek against a cushion of curls.

“I can…feel…your heart beating.”

His simple words and soft breath had warmed Hannibal’s fingers that had come to rest upon his shoulder. Hannibal had closed his eyes, lost in the moment. Will could not have said anything more perfect.

Hannibal has held onto that moment like a precious jewel. As Will had known he would. Hannibal has but few precious jewels like this one and he keeps them tucked away in his chest, a salve for the wound he carries.

As all moments must, this one too had passed, and Will had eased himself away from Hannibal to stand upright and turn around to face him. The sweetness of a moment ago had evaporated, vibrating molecules lost into the air as he opened his mouth to speak. The chill had been bracing to say the least.

“How long will what you gave him last?”

“A couple more hours at most. He will need medical attention soon.”

Hannibal had moved aside and Will had crossed to the cabinets to retrieve two coffee mugs. That had been Will, alternately hot and cold, capable of both passionate intimacy and cruel violence. Both sides always present awaiting the proper stimulus to draw one or the other out. Sometimes, Hannibal had managed to seduce both sides at once, or Will had allowed him to think that.

So infuriating, his Will.

A few moments later they had stood in front of Mason, clutching coffee mugs and contemplating the corrupted corpse like figure before them.

“What did you say to Mason when you went to see him?” Hannibal had asked.

“You mean the day we went to Margot in the hospital? The day you thought I left to go kill him?” Will had taken a gulp of his coffee, had casually looked over the rim at Hannibal.

Hannibal had recognized the confidence growing within Will. He had encouraged it. The more he had mimicked Hannibal, the more confident he had become. The more he behaved like Hannibal, the more he evolved. With every test Hannibal had handed him, he had used it to learn about Hannibal but also learn about himself. He would eventually come into his own. Until then, he would learn from Hannibal’s example.

Du Maurier had never been able to do that. Learn from Hannibal’s example. Too vain. Too enamored with her own accomplishments. Too competitive. Too busy remaining separate from him, never comprehending that Hannibal had desired to experience oneness with her. She was certainly afflicted with a number of neuroses displayed over the years, but Du Maurier did not suffer from an excess of introspection.

You cannot function as an agent of friendship for a man who is disconnected from the concept as a man who is disconnected from the concept.

Neither can one function as an advocate for equality for one disconnected from the concept as one disconnected from the concept. Du Maurier is no swan. And neither was Will. He didn't have to be. Zeus had not wanted another Zeus. He had wanted Leda.

Hannibal has learned from his experience. His handling of Will had been much more tactful. Will's sensitivity had required all of Hannibal's skill. Will had required nurturing and a strong hand.

Will had used his gift of empathy to become Hannibal, had purposely tried to think like him and had succeeded more often than Hannibal could let him know. In a way, Hannibal is flattered that Will had devoted so much time to knowing him, even before becoming…intimate with him.

Will would challenge him, provoke him, and test him…as it should be. As long as Will loved him.

Deference was not a trait easily expressed by either of them and Hannibal had not expected Will to defer. There were no clear lines of authority between them and expertise had never been so narrowly confined to a matter of degrees from which schools. By this time, Will had not perceived himself as being subordinate to Hannibal intellectually or professionally.

He had been quite aware of Hannibal's grooming. Autonomy had been a necessary tool in Hannibal's instruction. Will had to believe the choices he made were his own, not Hannibal's. And they had been. Hannibal thinks Will may not want to see it that way.

Hannibal had understood that Will had been struggling with his newfound sense of power. The situation with Mason had provided yet another proving ground, another area in which to pit his wits against Hannibal even as they bested a common enemy.

A lesson he had learned that evening was that he was not quite as adept as Hannibal at not answering a question with another question.

“You have an idea of my mind, Will. But I also have an idea of yours.” Hannibal had said, sipping at coffee still too hot to actually enjoy.

Will had nodded silently beside him.

“You said you told Mason that I wanted to kill him. You told him that when you know I did not.”

A slight smile from Will and Hannibal had pressed on, “But's that's not all you told him, is it?”

“Not those exact words, but I made it clear you wanted him dead.” Will had said, careful to keep his eyes focused on Hannibal, “*You* wanted *me* to kill him. That's why you set him on Margot.”

“Yes. But you wanted *me* to kill him.” Hannibal had leveled a finger at Will.

“Yes.” Will had said mimicking Hannibal's tone perfectly, “A game we seem unable to stop playing and it would seem we have a tie.” Will had gestured vaguely in Mason's direction.

“Tell me, what would *you* have *liked* to happen?”

Hannibal had kept his eyes locked onto Will’s still trying to determine Will’s tells. He had yet to find one. Will’s every movement, every gesture and expression had been as controlled and calculated as Hannibal’s own. So infuriating. So clever…his Will. Hannibal would have expected nothing less from him.

“You imply I’m unhappy with the outcome. I’m not. But, you manipulated this outcome. Created chaos.”

“Chaos already existed. I invited clarity. Resolution.”

“Gave Margot the idea to get pregnant and then told Mason all about it. She came to my house… more than once…”

Will had paused in thought, eyes unwavering and then had come the furrow of brows and the wetting of lips.

“She asked you… about me… didn’t she? And you told her… what? You hoped Margot would… use me. Hoped I would provide *the means…*”

“You wondered what would happen if my patients started comparing notes. Now you know.”

“Comparing notes with each other is not the same thing as my therapist doing it.”

“Am I your therapist or are we having conversations?”

“Oh, no, no, no… We’ve moved way beyond that. Did it matter to you that the child she was carrying was mine? Of course it did. What was I thinking?” Will had closed his eyes a moment, had shaken his head lips upturned wickedly. “Did you give Mason the idea to take it before or after you…we found out she was pregnant?”

“Every creative act has its destructive consequence, Will.”

“Is that how this works? I create and you destroy?”

“We are capable of both as you well know. It would appear we are just as capable of deceiving each other. I don’t want to deceive you, Will. I’m not certain what *you* want.”

“What I want is for you to admit why you were compelled to get between them and why you had to involve me with them.”

At that point, Hannibal had known Will had never intended to kill Mason himself. He had tried to manipulate Hannibal into doing it…for Jack, of course, but Hannibal knows Will had enjoyed the challenge, had thrilled to it, had found satisfaction, raw and delicious satisfaction. As raw as Mason’s face and as delicious as the carnal pleasures that had followed.

He already knew why Hannibal had set the twins on each other. He wanted Hannibal to say it. To him.

“Did I send Margot to your house? Did I force her into your bed?”

“No…”

Will had looked down shifting his gaze to his left, remembering. Will had had his own reasons for sleeping with Margot and had likely figured Hannibal had already guessed what they were. When he had looked again into Hannibal's face, the wounded expression was gone.

"You suggested to Mason she had found a way to have an heir. You ratted her out, Hannibal. You had to have had some idea of what he would do to her."

"Yes. But you knew about the will, she told you."

"Yes."

"And you don't suspect anything when a lesbian climbs in bed with you."

The plaintive notes of Rachmaninoff had swallowed up the room. The very air had shifted as Will had exhaled his pride. A sigh fraught with enough shame to send his tongue to moistening his lips before words could spill out again.

"She said…"

"She lied. I think you are upset…"

"I'm not…upset."

"As I was saying, you are upset because you perceive I involved you in something vulgar between two patients and you perceive yourself to be more than a patient to me. And you believe I should perceive you as more."

Will had stared at Hannibal, jaw clenched so tight that his entire face seemed set in stone. He had drawn a breath and then looked aside as though the air in front of Hannibal, the air between them had somehow become detestable. Hannibal had waited for Will to quell his anger at being found out, although Hannibal had not been certain that Will had been truly aware of his feelings until that moment.

Then as now, Hannibal suspects Will does not want to see some things about himself, or he chooses to ignore, disbelieve them. Either way, this not seeing his true motivations was precisely why he needed Hannibal. To sort things out, put things in perspective, like they used to do.

"This was never about the Vergers, was it?" Will had said after a long moment.

He had neither agreed nor disagreed with Hannibal's professional opinion of his state of mind. Hannibal had let it go; it had been enough that Will had been forced to acknowledge and consider his feelings.

"No. They are but elements undergoing change to fuel your radiance. I asked you to imagine what you would like to happen. Tell me, what did you see happening that evening we talked in my office about snares and deceptions?"

Hannibal had wanted the truth if Will was willing to offer it. Hannibal had not asked him to elaborate on the other fantasies Hannibal had watched him retreat into. This was different. Who had been killing whom in this fantasy?

"I slit your throat and it rained blood. I watched you descend into the pit. I heard the sounds of hell, of your flesh ripped from bone in a pit consumed in darkness."

“You slit my throat as yourself or as Mason?”

Will had gone quiet. Will had lifted his eyes to Hannibal and sadness had shown, panes of wet glass in those pools of blue, then suddenly the glass had shattered leaving a savagely beautiful and perfect reflection of malice and cruelty. Hannibal had at last struck a nerve. Will still fantasized about killing him. And that awareness had saddened him. Until his empathy had caused him to realize that Hannibal had not been saddened, quite the opposite. Hannibal had just witnessed Will adjusting his behavior to match his imagination.

Hannibal had been fascinated. He is still fascinated. Will had fantasized about killing him, yet had shared his bed, and that night had saved his life. Will always was, is unpredictable.

“You gave Mason the idea to feed me to his pigs. Another vicarious pleasure then, another murder by proxy ultimately unsatisfying. You put the idea in his head and then warned me, hoping I would finish him first? In my office?”

Hannibal’s hand had reached behind Will’s neck, fingers stroking soft curls, to pull him close so they stood nearly toe to toe, head down, Will’s brows grazing Hannibal’s nose.

“Why? How many snares have you put around my neck?”

Will had smiled then, lips peeling back to expose teeth that had gleamed sharp and bright.

“As many as were necessary. As many as are around my own.”

Satisfied, Hannibal had touched his lips to Will’s forehead. As Will closed his eyes, Hannibal had swept his lips lightly through his hair, speaking very softly.

“And when he offered you the knife what did you imagine then?”

“What did I imagine with Carlo and Mason at my back? I imagined what would happen if I cut you down. It seemed the only way we were going to leave alive.”

“You said we.” His fingers had found Will’s chin, lifted it up and finding no resistance there, had brushed his lips across lips already open, pale pink petals awaiting tender bruises.

“Yes… Us…” Will had twisted his mouth away, had glanced at Mason still slumped in the chair.

“You couldn’t imagine leaving without me?” Hannibal had said.

Will had pulled away and Hannibal had relented, but not much. His fingers had found more soft curls to fondle.

“When you look at Mason, can you imagine his state of mind?” Hannibal had said as the strains of a Bach Largo played softly.

“I can’t begin to know how the drugs have altered his reality. What did you say to him? You would know more than I.”

Will had brushed Hannibal’s hand away impatiently. He had looked over at Hannibal’s assortment of drugs and the inhaler on the coffee table, and Hannibal imagined the wheels turning in his head.

“I asked him to remember his father, his education with the pigs.

Will had looked again at Mason, curiosity tugging at his mouth as associations ignited like wildfire.

“You asked him to remember his childhood and this is what he did to himself?”

Will had stared a long moment deep in thought. “He thinks it all a dream.”

“Is this a dream for you, Will?”

“Oh, no. I am aware my nightmares follow me. Mason is not. He will be shocked. He’s not aware…how broken he is.”

“Mason was broken before this.”

“Well, he wasn’t aware of that either…”

Hannibal had placed his hand on Will’s shoulder, knowing where his empathy was taking him.

“You are not broken, Will. Far from it. The windows in your mind have allowed you to see the best in yourself, not just the reflection of the worst in someone else.”

Will’s cheek had found his hand, the brushing of whiskers a delicious prickle. “You should bring the truck around and I’ll get some rope and tarp from the shed.” He had said.

“You intend to tie him to the back of the truck?”

“Well, he can’t sit up front with you looking like that. Suppose you get stopped?”

“He also can’t lie in the back. Exposure. It’s too cold. We do want him alive.”

“Well, what do you suggest?” Will had scanned the room, mind set to problem solving.

They had turned to each other at the same time. “Carpet.”

“I’ll take Mason…” Hannibal had already moved into position to pull Mason up and over his sturdy shoulders, shoulders more than capable of lugging the human detritus out of the fetid cushions that brimmed with blood and bodily fluids.

“I’ll take the chair outside, get my tools from the shed.”

“Here…piggy, piggy, piggy” Mason had crooned quietly as Hannibal lifted him up for Will to remove the chair.

Will had rubbed at his face, fingers massaging his jaw as he had gazed at Mason crumpled in Hannibal’s arms head lolling backward. Mason had gazed at Will, upside down with his maw of a mouth open and the words had kept coming.

“Where’s…Pavlov? I’ve forgotten Pavlov… I feel so…strange.”

Mason had likely not even felt the floor as Hannibal had slipped him not so gently from his arms. Mason would have felt next to nothing, deprived of sensation from the neck down.

“Doctor Lecter, where…are my pigs?”

“In the slaughterhouse, Mason.”

“I’m floating…” Mason had said, eyes up to the white ceiling, no doubt a blank canvas for Mason’s raging euphoric hallucinations. “It’s the music…Ha! Papa always liked Bach.”

Will had stood motionless, eyes wide absorbing the scene unfolding before him. Unable to stop imagining Mason’s mind or what was left of it, while his own emotions had tumbled one on top of the other. He had been absolutely beautiful standing in the late afternoon light and Hannibal had stepped close to take Will’s face in hand and had gently kissed him.

“Hannibal…he’s…right there…” Will arms had embraced him, tentatively.

“What Mason is experiencing is an altered reality, expressions of his own latent desires. Aren’t you, Mason?”

“Latent desires…oh! Summer camp, yes… I don’t have any candy…”

Hannibal had kissed Will again, felt the softening of his lips at odds with the stiffness of his posture. He had pulled away, a glare of blue beneath fluttering lashes.

“Not here. Not now…please.”

He had turned then to grab the chair and haul it out the front door, letting his Winston inside. The dog had promptly sat next to the door to wait for Will. Soon, Hannibal had heard Will returning with his tool box, steps heavy on the porch.

“I lit a fire out back for the chair.” He had set the tool box on the floor and reached for his tepid cup of coffee. “I’ll get started on the carpet. It will be dark soon.”

“We should wait until dark to transport him, yes.”

Later, Hannibal had stood next to Carlo’s truck watching Will pull up in his Volvo. He had parked beside the truck and had gotten out to inspect Hannibal’s work. Hannibal had rolled Mason up in a section of ruined carpet and trussed it up with hemp rope and covered it over with tarp, finally securing it to the flatbed. Mason was as snug as a bug in a rug could be.

“I love what you’ve done with the décor…but the carpet smells horrible.” Mason’s muffled voice had come from the back of the truck. “My face is cold…”

Will had rolled his eyes. “How is it possible he’s still talking?”

Hannibal had stood at the back of the truck wearing his own shirt, Will having thoughtfully run it through the dryer. He had also put on his tie and vest, and an old hunting jacket of Will’s. It had smelled a bit musty but it was insulated and it had sufficiently warmed him. Hannibal had taken care of Mason while Will had put out the fire, settled the dogs, and locked up his house.

“Did you wrap his face in something?”

“Saran wrap.”

Will had angled his head at Hannibal, probably not sure if Hannibal was making a joke. He had shrugged, deciding that it did not matter or that he did not care.

“Well, we should get going…get this over with.”

“You wouldn’t have Margot’s phone number, would you?” Hannibal had asked.

A quizzical look from Will coupled with the familiar sucking on the bottom lip. Will had looked into the distance, ignoring Hannibal.

“Too bad. I would prefer giving Margot time to prepare.”

“Seems to me she’s been preparing all her life.”

“When we get there, you should pull up to the gate to announce us, and meet her at the entrance. I will drive Mason to the pig barn.”

“Agreed.”

Hannibal had debated whether he should be the one to speak to Margot, but had decided to allow Will to explain. Given their intimate but brief history together, Hannibal had surmised Will should be the one to prepare her. He did have a particular insight, a personal connection that Hannibal did not.

“What do you intend to tell her?” Hannibal had said as Will had climbed into his car.

“Why, the truth, of course.”

* * *

Hannibal had waited in the truck for Will and Margot to join him. He had not waited long. They had come around the corner together, Will’s hands in his pockets, Margot’s hands flexing nervously in black fur lined leather.

“Where…is he?” Margot’s huge eyes had searched the cab of the truck.

“He’s in the carpet.” Hannibal had climbed out of the car to join Will, already at the rear tugging at the ropes.

“Margot. Did Will tell you…his condition?”

“Yes. Neck broken. Face disfigured. Seems he had an accident with the pigs.”

“That is essentially the gist of it. Still, his appearance is rather shocking, I must warn you.”

“I called our doctors. Ironic isn’t it? He’ll lie on the same table as I did.”

“Poetic.” Will had said still pulling ropes from the tarp covered Mason.

“You made sure I survived him without actually killing him. Took away one life, and gave him another.” Margot had said in her sardonic way.

“The shape that your rebuke will take is up to you.” Hannibal had said as Will had pulled off the tarp.

Margot had looked at Hannibal scrutinizing his face, “I must say your therapy is rather unconventional.”

Margot had waited for the two of them to unroll her brother from the carpet. When at last Mason had rolled free she had jumped back at the sight that had greeted her.

As had Will. The sight had been an arresting one. The shiny Saran wrap had caused Mason's face to resemble a package of meat from the Verger's own meat packing plant. Only his mouth and exposed nasal passage had been left uncovered. Will had bit his bottom lip immediately and had looked to Margot. Margot had lifted her eyes to Hannibal, somehow knowing he had been the architect of this particular design.

Although she had taken a moment to collect herself, there had been no show of revulsion or pity. No emotion at all had crossed her delicate features as she had gazed down at her ruined sibling. Hannibal had only been able to wonder at her thoughts. Until she had looked back up to look first at Will, then Hannibal. Her slow smile had said it all.

Hannibal and Will had smiled back.

"You removed the mask to reveal the pig beneath." She had said tilting her head to one side, "Too bad *Papa* isn't here to see it."

Standing around in the cold quiet, a silent accord had passed between them, their smiles assurance enough that this would remain their secret.

"How drugged is he? Can he understand what's happening to him?"

"He is still in a highly suggestive state. I suggest that whatever you want him to believe happened be a part of the narrative you introduce to him…"

"Margot! Is that you? I'm beside myself…I don't seem able to move at the moment. The good doctor must have given me a paralytic…"

Margot had leaned over him with her huge eyes, laden with thick black eyeliner, unblinking in their beauty.

"Mason, you had a bad fall…in the barn. These doctors are going to help you."

Mason had closed his eyes tightly. "They look like Doctor Lecter and that…sperm donor of yours. Ha!"

"Mason," Hannibal had said, "You never left the barn. Listen to your sister. No need to concern yourself with frightful nightmares."

"No," Will had said, "He'll be waking up to one soon enough."

Once the medical van had shown up, Hannibal had stood with Will in the barn on Margot's request. They had waited while Mason had been taken inside the main house and upstairs, with no less than six doctors and nurses in attendance. Then, they had loaded the carpet, tarp, and rope into the trunk of Will's car.

Carlo's truck had disappeared. Hannibal doubted it would ever be seen again. Neither would Carlo.

"Mason has no idea what he's in for." Will had said. "Margot is no tender thing bred between the rocks."

“She is the eternal agony of fire in the stone.” Hannibal had said, familiar with the Warren verse and had been surprised that Will knew it. Will had nodded once at Hannibal, pleased he had understood the reference.

“Mason’s was an act of hubris. He invited the punishment of the gods.”

“An act of hubris in taking a life?”

“In thinking himself an equal.”

Will had stared into space making no comment. Hannibal had let him remunerate on that. Mason was a pig masquerading as a person. Discourtesy of that magnitude should not be tolerated. Hannibal cannot abide that sort of ugliness.

Only a quarter of an hour had passed but the sun had set by the time Margot had returned to the barn and the automated lights had come on around the property.

“I’m not going to ask for details.” Margot had said adjusting the belt of her fur lined jacket. “Doctor Lecter, I’m afraid I will be suspending my therapy…indefinitely, due to my brother’s terrible accident, of course.”

“Of course.” Hannibal had said, “But, if you ever need to, my door is always open, Margot.”

“Now that I know what kind of psychiatrist you are, perhaps I will. I would like to thank you, both of you, for your support.”

Will had glanced at Hannibal, but had said nothing. Hannibal had wondered then what exactly Will had told her. Will would not have desired more interaction with the Vergers. Hannibal had been confident that Will had not disclosed any more truth than was necessary. That confidence has become circumspect now that Mason and his Sards are hunting him…with Will.

She had turned to Will, slipping her fingers lightly along the zipper of his jacket as she had spoken, “Seems we do have some similar issues. I can’t seem to rid myself of my private carnage and neither can you.”

Hannibal had raised a brow at her remark but Will had seemed to understand perfectly.

“Goodnight, Margot.” Will had said.

“You can see yourselves out?” Margot had walked out of the barn with a marked confidence in the sway of her hips.

The hum of electric lanterns had followed them from the barn, lighting their way across the snow covered grounds. The crunch of frozen snow beneath their shoes had been the only sound in the frosty light of the predawn sky.

“Did Margot behave the way you imagined she would?” Will’s voice had hung in the chilly air, trailing behind Hannibal as they had walked to his car.

Hannibal had glanced about the grounds and gestured toward the blanket of white around them. “More or less. I do not need to pick up the snow to know it is cold and wet.”

“And yet, knowing its nature is not the same as experiencing it; is it?”

As Hannibal's hands had touched the door handle he had felt a soft thud at his back; he had turned to feel another thud explode into icy powder on his chest. Will had already scooped up another handful of snow, hands pressing the white stuff into a compact ball as he had continued to walk quickly toward the car and Hannibal.

"Will…" Hannibal had watched Will advance toward him, the sizable ball of ice still clinging to the inside of his glove.

"And having found my experience rewarding, pleasurable even, I can't help but to repeat the experience…" Will had finally reached Hannibal to stand in front of him barely an arms-length away.

"Will…" Hannibal had said more sternly this time.

"Each experience *bursting* with the potential for new insights and endless applications."

Hannibal had eyed the snowball in Will's hand, had caught the glint of intention in his eyes.

"You would not…"

Hannibal had found himself blinking ice out of his eyes, even as his fingers had grasped Will's forearm. Will's grin had disappeared. Hannibal had ground his thumb hard into the soft flesh on the tender underside of his wrist causing him to wince but the challenge in his eyes had remained.

Hannibal had held Will's wrist painfully tight as the melted ice and snow had dripped from his face into the jacket and down his shirt. The entire upper half of his body had become numb with cold and was quite damp. He had been both astonished and amused at Will's unexpected didactic. Amused, delighted, and rather aroused.

Will's stance had not wavered, neither had he attempted to wrest his wrist from Hannibal's grip.

"Tsk, tsk…For this *application*…I will tear you apart when we get home." Hannibal had said with mock severity.

And then Hannibal had felt something click in his brain, similar to the jolt that occurs when one realizes one has forgotten something. Or remembered something.

Hannibal had actually said *home*. To Will. His fingers had loosened immediately. And Will's satisfied smile had been just as immediate.

Will had licked his lips, a thoughtful and calculated gesture. He had angled his head to one side, feigning incredulity. "Is that what you would like to happen?"

Will's fingers had found the ill-fitting jacket's collar and he had pulled Hannibal near, had pressed his lips to Hannibal's throat and they had been warm, so warm against his skin. Hannibal's nostrils had been filled with the scent of him, the air alive with musk and madness. The brush of whiskers along his jaw had set alight the fire smoldering inside all evening.

"Like?" Hannibal had said softly, cradling Will's head in his neck. "It is inevitable."

Hannibal had swept him up and had shoved him against the side of the car. He had slipped one hand between Will's legs and found him hard and thick against the fabric of his trousers. His other hand had grabbed a generous helping of curls to twine crisp and cold around his fingers. His mouth had found Will's throat, which Will had bared for him head tossed back to rest helplessly on the hood of the car as Hannibal had gnawed into his jugular.

And then the headlights had flashed and Will had produced his keys from his pocket, jangling them in front of Hannibal's half-lidded eyes.

"Not here." He had said looking up at the lantern illuminating the area from above. "Home."

Hannibal had squeezed once and responded, "I'll hold you to that." before letting him go. "We'll have to stop by my office. My car and house keys are still there."

"I imagine you were in a hurry when you left so your office is unlocked?"

"Almost certainly. Unless Carlo had been polite enough to lock up after dragging Matteo out my door."

"Matteo? You killed Matteo in your office?"

"Yes, well, Matteo was wounded in the attack. Fatally. He didn't die there."

"What you're saying is that there is more mess to clean up?"

"Unless Carlo had been polite."

Will had climbed in his side of the car and started the ignition working his jaw. He had waited until Hannibal had settled in beside him to start scolding.

"You might have mentioned that before now."

Hannibal had considered Will's suggestion, "You're right. Perhaps next time."

When they had arrived at Hannibal's office, the doors had indeed been unlocked. Hannibal had switched on the lights to find trails of blood on his fine hardwood floor; his desk and other furniture in disarray. Will had walked around the office, no doubt picturing a version of the attack in his mind.

Hannibal had crossed to the desk and examined the drawing he had been working on. His *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus* had not been damaged. He had noticed Will approaching the desk and he had covered the drawing.

"What was that?"

"Something I was working on when I was interrupted. It's not finished."

"Oh…"

Will had looked up from the pile of paper to Hannibal, holding Hannibal in his gaze for a moment, narrowed his eyes in thought then turned and walked to the fireplace.

"There's not that much to clean up. Surprisingly."

Will had crossed into the bathroom. Hannibal had rearranged his desk to his satisfaction. Will had emerged from the bathroom with a couple of fine white cotton terry guest towels embroidered with

Gordion knots at the edges. Hannibal had shaken his head at Will.

“Oh, not those.” Hannibal had said moving toward the kitchenette. “I’ll get some from in here. You can put those back where you found them, please.”

When Hannibal had returned with more appropriate towels he had found Will arranging the furniture back in its place. They had worked quietly until Hannibal’s office had been returned to its former tidy and pristine condition.

Will had stood by the door watching Hannibal gather up the suit jacket left behind and give the room one last look before turning to join him.

“I’ll follow you.”

“Pull around back, I’ll open the garage.”

“There’s room for me to park? In the garage?”

“There is now.” Hannibal had said gesturing for Will to walk ahead of him.

Hannibal had already begun putting things in storage, but Will had not needed to know that.

Once inside the kitchen, Will had barely closed the door behind him when Hannibal had pushed him flush against the hard wood, pinning him with the weight of his own body. Hannibal had not even bothered to turn the lights on. His mouth had found Will’s open and pliant, very much like those soft petals he had thought of earlier. If he could have swallowed Will up whole he would have, the desire to possess him was so immediate…so urgent.

Hannibal had begun to tug at Will’s jacket, fingers seeking zippers and buttons as Will fumbled with the snaps of the camouflage jacket, pulling it from Hannibal’s shoulders. Jackets had fallen to the floor and Hannibal had started on Will’s belt, the touch of Will’s fingers in his hair maddening, simply maddening.

The buckle was tight, probably new and Hannibal had felt Will’s fingers glide over his as Will unfastened the buckle himself. Hannibal had tugged harder.

“Wait, wait…” Will had said, half laughing into Hannibal’s ear, “You’ll rip the pants.”

“We’ll buy new ones…”

Hannibal had ripped Will’s shirt open, buttons scattered to the floor, “And some more shirts as well.”

Of course Will had another shirt under the one Hannibal had just relieved him of. Hannibal had pulled that up exposing him from chest to navel, downy black hair springing up from trousers slung down around his hips. Will’s hands had managed to strip off Hannibal’s jacket as his fingers had hurried to unbutton his vest. Hannibal had obliged by slipping out of it for him so Will could relieve him of his beleaguered blue shirt.

But there had been a tightly knotted silk tie to deal with. Will had attempted to ply the knot apart with practiced fingers, but had finally given up and grabbed the knot instead and pulled Hannibal down with it so that he could take Hannibal’s tongue into his mouth again. He had held Hannibal in place, fingers wrapped around his tie and lips locked to Hannibal’s.

Hannibal had thought his throat might burst from the pressure and pleasure if his trousers didn’t first.

Hannibal had held him against the door, nearly lifting him off his feet as his hands had moved over Will’s warm skin, eliciting tremors of delight from excited flesh and erect nipples. He had dragged his mouth over Will’s cheeks and jaw, and Will had hugged him closer, his hands grasping handfuls of hair, breathless and beautiful and helplessly caught between Hannibal and the door.

Nuzzling around the curls at his ear, Hannibal had whispered one word, “Upstairs.”

“You want to…”

“Yes…ready for another match?”

“Already?”

“You can always forfeit.”

Will had groaned; a soft rumble of acquiescence. He had enjoyed their matches as much as Hannibal had.

Once upstairs, stripped of their clothes, Will’s on the floor and Hannibal’s hanging over one of the chairs before the fireplace, Hannibal had faced Will on the other side of the bed.

“You remember the rules…”

“I know the rules.” Will had sighed.

“I think you understand why I would have you repeat them. After last time…”

“That…you cheated.”

“No…both of your feet had been on the floor.”

Another sigh as Will had thrown up his hands in surrender.

“All right. The rules. Like the ancient Greeks, one point for each time one shoulder, one hip or… the back is pinned. Three points to win. One foot, and only one foot may touch the floor at any given time. Falling off the bed results in instant loss of match. And I did not fall off last time…”

“Both feet were on the floor. Perhaps you’ll do better this time.”

The contest had commenced. Winner take all. Will had yet to win, but Hannibal knew the constant challenges he presented Will left him wanting more. Every encounter between them, whether in or out of bed, had been a battle of wits and Hannibal had known Will would not have wanted it any other way. His fantasies of killing Hannibal had fueled his becoming. The promise of fulfilling other fantasies had fueled his desires in bed, in *their* bed as Hannibal had come to think of it. Will had not forfeited one match, had not given Hannibal anything but his best efforts. Hannibal had given him no quarter either. Will had fought for every point, had struggled to outthink his opponent each time.

That evening, Hannibal had won the match, had pinned Will three times before Will had been able to pin him a third time, but it had been close. Will had been twisting away from Hannibal's grasp until an advantage had presented itself and Hannibal had sent Will cursing and groaning into the mattress. Will had been reluctant to hold up two fingers, their signal for surrender, until Hannibal had pressed a knee into his back.

Since he had pinned Will face down, right shoulder ground into royal blue satin, Hannibal had taken the spoils of victory then and there.

Hannibal had kissed him open mouthed, deep, his hands between Will's legs, practiced fingers pressing kneading that tender spot beneath swollen silken balls with fragrant lubricant until Will's flesh had become warm and slick to his touch. Will had turned over, legs had clamped down around his hand, his hips bucking off the bed, his tongue slick and sweet stabbing at the back of his throat.

Hannibal's finger had slipped easily into puckered flesh slippery and wet, moving back and forth sending Will's hips to grinding against him, cock hard and pressed against Hannibal's own throbbing cock. The thrust of the second finger had sent him trembling, lips trailing along Hannibal's cheek, teeth tugging at earlobes.

As Hannibal had stretched and kneaded, making room for a third finger, Will's breath had slowed, no longer wild and reckless, but staccato and shallow, muscles clenched tightly around Hannibal's fingers. A sob had broken from him as the third finger slipped inside, back arching off the bed, body twisting beautifully on satin the same color as his eyes, prone and pleasingly perpendicular elsewhere.

"Turn over." Hannibal had said.

Will had obeyed, understanding the rules, and had slipped sensuously across the bed, stretching his limbs taut entirely for Hannibal's pleasure.

"Bottom up." Hannibal had slipped one of the over-sized pillows beneath Will as he had lifted himself off the mattress to rest on his forearms.

Hannibal had preferred taking Will from the front, but that evening he had enjoyed watching the muscles flex in Will's back and shoulders. He had especially liked tugging at dark curly locks while pummeling Will into the pillow. Bathed in sweat, Will's body had glistened in the firelight, Hannibal had thought like some Greek statue come to life to writhe beneath him, to sob with every movement torturously sweet and breaking with pleasure with each thrust of Hannibal inside him.

Will had shuddered beneath him at the same time as Hannibal had trembled inside, the loss of control complete and exquisite. Will's loss of control equally exquisite, perhaps more. His empathy was relentless, creating images of Hannibal in his mind as his own body responded to the assault on his senses. Will had folded beneath him, exhausted, and Hannibal had gathered him up, to wash his face with gentle appreciative kisses.

"You will lose…eventually." Will had said later, after they had stretched themselves out along the mattress spent and sated, the luscious feel of satin upon their naked skin.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. You seem to enjoy losing…" Hannibal had spoken into damp curls beneath his nose before sliding his tongue down Will's neck.

Hannibal had left his mark on the hollow of Will’s collarbone, a tender and tasty place especially enjoyable since biting the flesh there always sent Will nearly out of the bed every time. He had nibbled his way down the length of Will’s body to the sound of sighs and groans, and like plucking scales on an instrument the groans had become deeper and richer the lower Hannibal nibbled.

“Hannibal…enough.” Will had laughed softly, pulling at Hannibal’s hair to wrest him from where he lay on Will’s hip.

Hannibal had never considered killing Will, had never even harbored fantasies of killing him. Eating him, consuming all that he was had been a far greater pleasure. Possessing him, like this, had been… The wound throbs within Hannibal’s chest, perhaps more painfully with the knowledge that the bearer of both torment and comfort is so near.

Hannibal had eased himself beside Will to hold that wonderful blue gaze and to touch the soft curls and the softer lips he loved so much. Hannibal had let his fingers wander back along Will’s jaw caressing stubble and soft skin, to feel the sensual movement of bone and muscle should Will speak. He had not. Will’s hand had settled warmly on his forearm, drawing circles in the soft hairs until he had fallen asleep. Hannibal had thought how the need to touch and be touched had been so powerful between them.

Hannibal feels the embrace of Morpheus about his limbs, his dream imbued kisses heavy and sweet upon his eyelids. As he retreats into slumber he thinks fleetingly of that charcoal drawing of Achilles and Patroclus, of how it sits somewhere in a vault of the FBI collecting dust and he wonders if Will ever understood…

Hannibal will have his Patroclus if he must raze Troy a thousand times.

Chapter End Notes

Kentucky Mountain Farm, Rebuke of the Rocks Robert Penn Warren
Poem referred to by Hannibal and Will

Apologies for just one chapter. The next isn't ready to post yet. This one took a little longer than expected. Coming up: Daniel and Will have D'Angelo over for dinner and Daniel finds out if Du Maurier has a hot tub.

Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

> Associations come quickly and frequently for Will when he slips into a memory with Hannibal. Daniel leaves Will alone with D'Angelo while he meets up with Du Maurier. Hannibal tags along.
>
> Will had felt Hannibal pass behind his chair, the rustle of fabric and the faint odor of his cologne, dried sweat and residual olive oil registering like spines along Will's neck. Hannibal had cleared away the serving bowl, the one with the remains of Randall folded into the cream sauce. Will had watched Hannibal remove the remnants of their feast in silence to deposit them in the dry sink. Hannibal had turned to him, fresh linen teasing imaginary grime from his hands.
>
> "How would I do it?"
>
> "Kill me?" Will had looked up at him, considering. "It would be…intimate."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 48

Associations come quickly and frequently for Will when he slips into a memory with Hannibal. Daniel leaves Will alone with D'Angelo while he meets up with Du Maurier. Hannibal tags along.

The aroma of basil, garlic, and simmering tomatoes fills the house. Daniel had started preparing his sauce before making breakfast. Will had helped initially, but memories of another kitchen had intruded and he had faded into the past only to come around to find Daniel slipping the chef's knife from his fingers. He had handed Will a paper towel to soak up the blood from the nick across his left thumb.

Will had sat in a chair and observed after that. He had been stunned that he had recreated the same incident in Daniel's kitchen as the incident he had been remembering. He had been uncomfortable that Daniel had witnessed it. Will had not wanted to discuss thinking he was chopping onions with Hannibal while standing next to Daniel. He had been grateful that Daniel had not wanted to discuss it.

Will suspects Daniel had had his reasons. He always has his reasons. They had made breakfast once Daniel had been satisfied his sauce was at last ready to simmer unattended.

Daniel stands beside the baby grand, his Kreisler violin propped up on his left shoulder, bow poised. He can see the reflection of Will sitting on the piano bench, hunched over the keys, in the polished antique finish. Will is intently focused on the sheet music before him as his hands glide over the ivory. He listens to Will play the last few measures of the first movement of Pachelbel's famous Canon in D, again. He sighs as Will fumbles on the timing, slowing the time signature as he begins the second movement...again.

"Will, the time stays the same. That's what the metronome is for."

"I know, I know."

Will leans back, cracks his neck. The two of them have been practicing since they finished their protein heavy breakfast. Protein heavy for Daniel anyway. Daniel had watched him push his sausage around on the plate for most of the meal and had finally gotten up to retrieve a jar of peanut butter from the pantry and had set it in front of him. Will had spread it thickly on his toast and had swallowed it all down with his coffee rather than endure the unsolicited sermon.

He had endured plenty of them from Hannibal. A twinge of a smile tugs at his lips as he thinks Hannibal would have never shoved a jar of peanut butter at him. Will does not recall ever seeing any prepared condiments in Hannibal's kitchen. Will remembers rummaging through the fridge one morning for ketchup to put on his scrambled eggs…and sausage.

Where's the ketchup?

At your house I would think...where it should remain.

Daniel did have ketchup and Will had polished off the onion and green pepper omelet topped with provolone along with plenty of orange juice and crusty brown bread sliced thick and toasted perfectly in the oven. Like himself, Daniel keeps plenty of fresh fruit around and Will thinks he has eaten more citrus and pears in the last week than he ate in an entire month back home.

The scent of the ocean has been pervasive this morning and Will attributes this to Daniel's love of this particular piece and his love of music generally. Daniel's mist of salt and spray feels especially sweet, a poignancy seemingly drawn directly from the violin as Daniel draws the bow across the strings, slides his fingers along the frets. Will imagines the piece holds a particular significance for Daniel since he plays his section without having to glance at the sheet music at all.

Will finds Daniel's enthusiasm infectious. He doesn't mind indulging him. There is a certain joy that comes from watching someone enjoy themselves. Daniel's beatific smile deepens as the notes soar.

But, Daniel's associations with this particular piece of music are not Will's associations.

Will recognizes playing the duet is therapy, a means to access memories and associations, and to make new ones. Unlike the neutral environment they had enjoyed for the fishing trip, Will is making associations and memories in Daniel's home, using the music as a bridge between one home and another, in a manner of speaking .

Daniel's intuitive approach to therapy with Will is working. The introduction of the metronome has been sending Will's mind into hyper drive all morning. *Click. Click.* The constant tick of the needle lulls him, sends him into his own memory palace where associations have come very quickly.

Daniel could not have known that Will hears this same duet in his mind, only he hears the haunting notes struck from an antique harpsichord, not the notes he plucks from Daniel's Yamaha. He had listened to Hannibal play this same piece in the salon keeping perfect time with a recording as Will had sat with his whiskey beside him in their sanctuary, his stomach full from their evening meal.

Randall Tier had provided the meat for the gastronomic delight that evening, the second evening of his lost weekend with Hannibal. He can't remember the label on the bottle of crisp white wine, but he remembers selecting it himself. It had been a Pouilly-Fumé and it had been twenty one years old. Hannibal had been in a festive mood.

Click. Click. Click.

Will had arrived at Hannibal's home promptly at seven as agreed after leaving an irate and incensed Jack at the museum to oversee the dismantling of Will's masterpiece. Will had sat in his car outside Hannibal's garage for several minutes mentally preparing himself before going inside, recalling fractured and frantic images of the night before as he had stared at the windows along the second floor, eyes trained on the panes that flickered above, indicating another fire had been lit in the extravagant fireplace, another invitation to join Hannibal upstairs after dinner.

Hannibal had been unable to wait until after dinner. They had circled each other in the kitchen, polite banter merely filling air already charged with primal pheromones, as Will had eased into the version of himself he had created for Hannibal. A version he had found disturbingly easy to maintain. Hannibal's mannerisms and micro expressions had been becoming more familiar to him, easier to read, and Will had tested his newfound understanding with a growing confidence.

He had stretched across the counter that separated them and had teased Hannibal playing his role of fledgling well and playing on Hannibal's attraction to him. That is what he had told himself at the time.

Didn't you say something about an appetizer?

Hannibal had reached for him across the counter and had pulled him halfway across with one arm as Will's hand had sent his freshly poured glass of wine crashing to the floor. He had done such a masterful job of projecting that he had found himself bent over the center island, his trousers around his unlaced boots before he realized what was happening. Despite knowing full well what to expect that evening, a moment of clarity had threatened to undo all he had designed.

It had been the first time Will's conscience, or what remained of it, threatened his design.

Click…

Images of taking Tier apart in Hannibal's workroom, a room now dark and silent below his unlaced boots still anchored to the floor, had flooded his consciousness at the touch of Hannibal's hands upon his skin, as Hannibal's fingers had sunk into his flesh. The act of dismembering Tier had been too fresh and visions of his own hands taking scalpel to smooth pale skin, separating the young man's chilled flesh from sternum to pelvis had spilled into his mind.

He was at once aware of his hands reaching through the remains of breast bone and ribs, lifting organs slick and wet from the exposed chest cavity and depositing them one by one into zip lock plastic bags. Aware of flaying skin and carving steaks from discarded limbs as Hannibal had hovered observing, guiding, and gloating. And as his hands had caressed that boy's flesh in anticipation of his own design so Hannibal's hands had been caressing him.

Will had hesitated, distracted by a myriad of images his imagination compulsively created one on top of the other. He saw Tier strewn over on the table a jumble of bones and viscera. He saw himself through Hannibal's eyes, his version of Hannibal touching and kissing his body pressed against the counter like he was someone else. He saw Hannibal through his own eyes, unfiltered and raw. Lustful and possessive.

And these images were compounded by images of killing Tier…and Hannibal.

Hannibal must have sensed his disorientation, and he had soon felt Hannibal's fingers curl around his own gently prying them away from the counter. A ruffle of bandages and a tender throbbing across his knuckles had pulled him back as Hannibal had pressed his weight against Will's body to brush moist lips into his hair.

"Stay with me, Will. Randall is not here."

"I want to…"

But his mind had overruled. When he had become aware of Hannibal again, the ceramic tiles had gleamed spotless once more, broken glass had been cleared away and he had been leaning on the counter, chilled and nude, elbows bent as he had heard the crack of Hannibal opening something. He had smelled the olive oil emanating from Hannibal's hands before they had even touched his skin. Hannibal had made do with what he had in the kitchen and he had warmed his hands then slathered Will with the oil in places no one had ever touched, except Hannibal.

"The ancient Greeks venerated the olive tree and its fruit. Among its many uses was the preparation of the athletes for the games. Have you ever wrestled, Will?"

Will had blinked in confusion…and alarm. Then…curiosity.

"You're proposing a wrestling match? Here? Now?"

"I guarantee you won't be thinking of Randall…"

Beethoven's Seventh had roared in his ears as their bodies had rocked on the floor each seeking dominance again, Fragonard's *Bathers* in plain view the entire time as if the searing sensations within had not been surreal enough to send Will right over the edge. Will had been unprepared for the physical stamina required for such an activity with Hannibal.

He had pushed the surreal insanity of his situation out of his conscious mind and had forced himself to see from Hannibal's point of view. See the being that Hannibal wanted him to be. And he had become *that* Will for Hannibal that evening and many other evenings.

You're missing pieces of yourself, Will. Careful what you replace them with.

Will thinks that was probably the most truthful advice Hannibal had ever offered him.

Becoming *that* Will had felt ever more natural the longer he had remained in Hannibal's sphere of influence. Will had had to adjust his mindset to return to himself, usually requiring the whole of a drive back to Wolf Trap. Only to mentally prepare himself for the drive back to Baltimore the next day. Will thinks now he may not have actually adjusted as much as mimicked his former self.

Click...

Hannibal must know by now the mental summersaults Will had performed to be with him. To seduce him. To betray him.

Will had absorbed the experience, absorbed Hannibal into his very being. He had given himself over to know Hannibal. Had melded with the man, the maligned and malignant being who had haunted his dreams and with whom he did not feel so…alone.

Hannibal had likewise invaded Will's psyche to such a degree, that he had understood him quite well. Will thinks more than he realized at the time. And, Will had wanted to understand Hannibal, to scrape beneath the patina of civility and manners, a glossy sheen Will had torn from him like his suits.

The more intimate they became, and the more Will gave, the more Hannibal had given. Hannibal had a sense of reciprocity that could be exploited. Will had known he would have to sacrifice some of himself in order for Hannibal to do the same. He had to create an accurate image of Hannibal in his mind if he wanted to catch him. Knowing the Chesapeake Ripper would only get him so far. The Ripper was one version of Hannibal. Hannibal had plenty more suits to rip away.

The Hannibal who had welcomed Will into his office to resume his therapy was not the same intelligent psychopath. And, Will thinks, neither was he.

Will had been surprised Hannibal had introduced the idea of wrestling in his sacred kitchen, but, Hannibal had always made exceptions where Will was concerned and Will had been gradually realizing the exceptions had been rooted in affection.

By Will's thinking, the wrestling had served two functions.

Hannibal had understood Will had been processing his feelings about killing and maiming Tier for his monument. That Will had some trepidation about eating Tier. Further, Hannibal had known Will had not been pleased about any of it.

You should be quite pleased. I am.

Of course you are.

Hannibal had taken the opportunity he had manufactured to guide Will into his universe and Will had allowed him. But, Hannibal had his limits as to how much interference he could tolerate with his plans for Will. Will's empathy had been interfering with the intimate appetizer he had been looking forward to and so Hannibal had provided Will with something else to focus his attentions on. Hannibal.

Hannibal was always doing thoughtful things like that for Will.

The other function had more to do with Hannibal's pathology. Will was already acquainted with the carnal displays of art around the house and the kitchen. Preparing food was an act of creation and consuming the creation, divine. Hannibal had improvised that evening. Will does not think the wrestling had been a planned event. But, the nude wrestling had been an undeniable expression of carnality; a pleasure they had shared while fully immersed in Hannibal's preferred milieu, even to covering Will in olive oil.

Will had been immersed in many things that lost weekend. Hannibal had been immersed in him. Deeply immersed. Will had spent plenty of time managing his own headspace that weekend and

Hannibal had been aware of his struggles, had savored every nuance of insight Will's learning curve had provided him.

It had been a weekend devoted to the exploration of each other, to the satisfying of urges. A weekend comprised of overtures of the most incredible kind. Will's mind had been seeded with associations that have since bloomed and blossomed in his imagination.

Click… Click. Will?

Will remembers he had also drank that weekend. A lot. Hannibal had taken full advantage of Will's preference for that particular type of medication.

The sensations Will had experienced had been both terrifying and tantalizing. Will had almost come undone in the kitchen. He had lost the wrestling match. And Hannibal had taken yet another piece of him, but Will had won a piece of Hannibal as well.

Perhaps to help him recover from the sensation soaked gymnastics in the kitchen, Hannibal had arranged an informal wine tasting in the dining room, to sample a few wines for dinner. He had left the choices to Will. The wine had helped him sit through dinner, those sensations still very fresh every time he had shifted in his chair.

Hannibal had sat across from him dressed simply in a clean pair of trousers and dark red cable knit sweater. Will's clothes had disappeared, likely to the laundry room. His attire for their dinner had been equally informal, a pair of Hannibal's loose drawstring pants and the softest of cashmere sweaters to ever touch Will's skin.

They had enjoyed Blanquette de Veau, a succulent French meal of meat and vegetables cooked in a reduced stock and cream sauce if Will remembers correctly and served over rice with a drizzle of crème fraiche, topped with a flourish of fresh chopped parsley, amiably sprinkled over his plate by a beaming Hannibal.

Hannibal had lifted his glass and drank deeply from it as he had peered at Will over the rim hooded eyes in shadow, dark and full of mischief. Cheekbones stark and angular, as though cut from polished stone.

"How did you find the meal?"

"Fishing for compliments, doctor?"

"Not at all. Your honest opinion would be appreciated given that the kill was yours."

Will had licked his lips, the taste of Randall still on his tongue as he had mulled his words carefully.

"I think the meat still too young, but savory nonetheless."

Hannibal's satisfaction had shone behind his veil of a smile.

"You tasted regret?" He had teased.

"Regret would be a refinement I haven't processed yet."

"Was the portion agreeable, then? No room for seconds?"

“Are we still talking about dinner?”

“We can talk about anything you want to talk about.”

“The portion was…adequate.”

Hannibal had touched his napkin to his lips, and lifted his eyes to Will’s, the light from the candles extinguished, lost in the dark orbs that peered into Will, stripping him layer by layer. Will had set his wine glass down and had tried not to wince as he had relaxed back into his chair, ready to resume their battle of wits.

“You fantasize about killing me. You’ve never asked if I fantasize about killing you.” Hannibal had purred from his side of the table.

“You don’t. You didn’t want me on that table downstairs.”

He had watched Hannibal’s tongue slide over his lips, a calculated gesture knowing Will’s eyes would settle there.

“You think I won’t kill you.” The thin lips moved and remained open so Will had been able to glimpse his teeth.

Will had maintained eye contact while finishing off his wine, his third glass. Hannibal had risen from his chair to begin clearing the table circling his theatre with his commanding brand of predatory elegance.

“Oh, you could. You prefer not but I think you *would* if you had to.” Will had rolled the stem of his wine glass between his fingers.

Will had felt Hannibal pass behind his chair, the rustle of fabric and the faint odor of his cologne, dried sweat and residual olive oil registering like spines along Will’s neck. Hannibal had cleared away the serving bowl, the one with the remains of Randall folded into the cream sauce. Will had watched Hannibal remove the remnants of their feast in silence to deposit them in the dry sink. Hannibal had turned to him, fresh linen teasing imaginary grime from his hands.

“How would I do it?”

“Kill me?” Will had looked up at him, considering. “It would be…intimate.”

Will had waited for confirmation. Hannibal had graced him with a curve of his lips as he had reached for the bottle of wine.

“Doubtful it could be anything else… I’m sure inspiration would present itself if there were just cause.”

“Would you…eat me?”

Will had lowered his eyes as Hannibal had leaned closer to refill his glass.

“Of course.”

“How would I…taste?”

"It would depend on the circumstance. I imagine the flavor delicate and sweet if our encounters thus far are any indication. I think braised, so flesh falls from bone and dissolves upon my tongue."

Hannibal had leaned in to remove Will's plate, had leaned close not quite touching the freshly trimmed stubble along Will's upper lip. The heat from him had been like an undercurrent of electricity singeing the hairs along Will's body.

"And I would weep with every mouthful."

Typically and ridiculously epic. Hannibal's penchant for dramatic hyperbole was unsurpassed. And yet…

Will had stared into Hannibal's face, had felt a pang in his chest as though Hannibal's quietly delivered words had pricked him, and he had imagined Hannibal feeling something similar by the way subtle creases had manifested tightly around his mouth.

Will had averted his gaze, still giddy from the wine and flush with curiosity at this apparent vulnerability. Will had wanted to pick at Hannibal like a scab, see if he bled, or if the perceived weakness was as calculated as everything else. He had felt the inescapable warmth that Hannibal's gaze never failed to send along his neck, had felt invisible fingers thread through his hair as Hannibal had stood over him, plates in hands. Despite the romanticized imagery, Hannibal had seemed…sad. Will knows now he had been sincere.

"And…would you eat my heart?" Will had asked, lifting his head so his lashes almost touched Hannibal's nose. A calculated gesture and effective. Will heard the catch of breath in Hannibal's throat.

"I would rip it from your chest and eat it raw and bleeding from my hands."

Will had smiled savagely at that, a part of him amused at the sentiment while another part of him squirmed, excited and terrified by the admission. The plate in Hannibal's hands had dropped back to the table suddenly and before Will had time to respond, Hannibal's tongue had found his mouth already separating lips and teeth, fingers at the back of his neck and thumbs pressing against his jugular as Will's blood had coursed beneath, quickening at the touch. His hands had grasped the table's edge for balance…

Click. Click.

"Will…"

Will feels Daniel's fingers glide over his own, his hands heavy upon the lid of the piano. Daniel leans over him at the bench, his breath warm in Will's hair, enough to cause a confused shudder. He shakes his head, rolls his shoulders and blinks the memories back. He reminds himself where he is and tries to shake off where he had just been.

"You zoned out for a minute. I thought you were going to fall off the bench."

I did fall and I've never really gotten back up…

Will shakes his hands free and reaches out to silence the metronome, his heart thumping in his chest. He is sure Daniel can hear it. He knows Daniel is feeling it. He looks at the sheet music rather than Daniel's face.

“I told you the metronome would trigger memories. Hannibal had used one in therapy. So had Chilton.”

“Lots of therapists use them for lots of different reasons. We’re trying to make new associations here. And, believe it or not, metronomes are designed to keep time making music, which is what we are…were doing.”

“We aren’t using it just for the music.”

“Apparently not. You ignore it.”

Will smiles. “You want me to recall memories with you. I get that. Well, I’m remembering plenty.”

“Good. Pretty intense, huh?”

Will’s expression tells Daniel everything he needs to know. He knows Will is revisiting his past with Lecter, revisiting the events leading up to the gutting in the kitchen. Will is still baffled by Lecter’s epiphany. He wants to know what event had incited Hannibal’s wrath to rain down on him that night. Why Hannibal could not leave until he had visited his punishment upon Will.

Whatever Will had been remembering just now has moved him into a distant twilight, he is caught between the imagined world he visits and this one. His tether to reality is tenuous in moments like this, and the moments are occurring more frequently. He finds Will staring into space several times a day now, like the afternoon he had found him sitting here on the piano bench. Sometimes for just a few minutes, like now, and other times, he has not been sure for how long Will has either been lost in thought or completely blacked out.

Will remembers the memories he culls from his mind during Daniel’s guided therapy, but he does not remember where he goes during the blackouts. Daniel is puzzled by the two very different types of functioning. He thinks Will’s brain is healing, and because his empathy is so highly attuned to his surroundings, blacking out completely must be intuitive, an automatic failsafe that has kicked in to protect him. But he’s not certain. He can’t be certain about anything where Will is concerned.

As though Will had been reading his mind, Will swings his legs around the bench and gets up to grab his book bag from beside the couch.

“Oh…I almost forgot. I have the results from the CAT scan. No encephalitis.”

Will hands the paperwork to Daniel. Daniel scratches his head as he reads. Will had the scan done yesterday. Nothing remarkable going on in his brain according to the results he holds in his hands. Nothing physically going on.

“I guess you are relieved.”

“Definitely.”

Daniel watches Will meander back over to the piano, his fingers glide along the lid and rest there, his expression pained and wistful at the same time. He swallows. Daniel feels the familiar mixture of regret and anger as Will stands in front of the piano lost again in his thoughts. Will is also aroused, the sexual tension extending to Daniel, he feels it between his legs thick and warm like syrup. He can feel the desire welling up and can only imagine how it is for Will.

He gives Will the illusion of privacy. Will knows Daniel is feeling his emotions but Daniel doesn't have to acknowledge them in front of Will. He was thinking about Lecter, of course. Which particular memories are causing these emotions to surface only Will knows.

Daniel will be finding out soon enough. He has procured the hallucinogens he wants to introduce to Will to combine with the hypnotherapy he is sure will provide him with the insight he seeks. Hopefully, the experience will provide Will with answers, too.

Their conversation with Chilton had confirmed what Daniel already suspected had gone on in BSHCI. Daniel had needed to know if what Lecter had done with Will could be replicated and if so, with what tools of the trade. Chilton had exploited Will's mind to further advance his career. Daniel can't decide which breach of professionalism was worse, Chilton's, or Lecter's. Lecter has the excuse of being a psychopath. What is Chilton's excuse?

While it is unlikely that Chilton will ever have to own up for what he did to Will, Daniel has the information he needed. Daniel wants to regress Will with his own cocktail, avoiding the well tread neural pathways taken by Lecter and evidently Chilton.

"Associations and memories are occurring more frequently." Daniel says.

"Yeah…"

"Have you thought about my proposal?"

"Your proposal to role play under the influence?"

"Well, that's putting it simply, but yes, that one."

"You've been pretty vague…"

"I don't want to tell you too much because you have a tendency to out think me. When you do that, you undermine my efforts and shortchange yourself."

Will laughs. He trusts Daniel with his mind more than he trusts anyone. Even himself sometimes.

"Seems we may as well try it."

"Still haven't figured out how Lecter knew you had played him?"

"Not with any certainty. I was so careful. I'm thinking Freddie Lounds. But, he couldn't have known Lounds was alive. Chilton either. I didn't know about Chilton. I can't think of anything else that would have caused him to… I have no idea what tipped him off. Or when. I was playing the entire time, but was he?"

"Will, we both know you weren't playing the entire time. Lecter knew you were using Jack. Do you know you were using Jack?"

Will bites at his lower lip as he gazes into clear green eyes. Daniel raises a brow in that kind but stern way he has and Will sighs. He closes his eyes and shakes his head realizing Daniel figured that out a while ago. He has been patiently waiting for Will to acknowledge it.

…that's why Lecter could gut you in his kitchen and why you never thought to raise your gun.

"Hannibal knew I was conflicted. Jack knew it, too. Conflicted isn't enough reason to gut me."

"I think Lecter was convinced until something tipped him off. He's incredibly narcissistic and he would believe his powers of persuasion had been effective with you. And Jack wanted to believe in you, but after Verger… Both of them hoped and believed that you were their killer. And you still weren't sure; you played them both up until the end."

You wanted Jack to come to dinner. You sent him to me so that you would not have to choose. Let Fate decide. Is that what you did, Will?

When Will doesn't answer, Daniel decides it is time to drop the questions for now. Will is mentally fatigued at this point and it is too early in the day to become morosely fixated on his past. Besides, Daniel has a surprise of sorts that should lift Will's spirits.

First, he needs to get Will's endorphins kicking around.

"I'm going to stir the sauce. Why don't you get your sneakers on and we'll go for a run. Clear your head."

"Are you speaking as my therapist?"

"If I have to." Daniel grins.

Will grins back and shuffles upstairs to retrieve his running gear. He knows he will feel better afterward. As he slips on his socks, he wonders again what kind of role playing therapy Daniel has in mind.

"When you nicked your thumb earlier, you were thinking of a similar incident, weren't you?"

Daniel watches his homemade ravioli roil in the pot. Timing is crucial with the pasta, a lesson he has learned the hard way. These are filled with four different cheeses and roasted spinach, for Will. The entire meal is meatless, and on this very warm summer day, meat is not really a welcome entrée anyway.

"Yes, I was." Will says, checking his phone.

"Do you find yourself recalling past events that mirror whatever you are doing at the time?"

"Like when I imagined Hobbs eating the same time as me?'

"Yeah, like that."

"No…it's more like…past events are reaching forward to shape the present."

"That sounds very disconcerting."

"It is."

Killing is changing the way I think…

So much about this feels like a dream.

Dreams prepare us for waking life.

Will clicks off his phone, looks up to watch Daniel rinse the ravioli under cold water. The twins aren't picking up. They have been back for a couple days. He has no idea where they are, visiting family. He is beginning to think that was a euphemism for something much less benign. He sweeps thoughts of Lucia and Luciano aside, scatters them like leaves and returns his attention to Daniel who is now buttering up two half loaves of artisan's bread to make garlic toast.

Will had taken a shower when they got back from their run, their clothes soaked in perspiration and sticking to them like a second skin. He wears a short sleeved button down shirt and a pair of long pale blue shorts. Will actually has tan lines from running outside. It is gratifying to look in the mirror and see color in his face. The pallor and dark circles of weeks ago have disappeared.

Daniel has yet to jump in the shower, seeming more concerned about preparing the meal than stripping off his sweaty clothes. He shoves the tray of prepared bread into the oven, but doesn't turn it on, and returns to the pasta. He places the ravioli carefully in a deep round dish and shoves that into the fridge. Will thinks Daniel is as meticulous about his food as someone else he knows.

Soon, he stands in front of the sink, barefoot, in shorts and tee, steam billowing from the pot into his face as he fusses over the piping hot sauce he transfers out of the pot and into a chilled container. Will's eyes linger on the small bruise at his throat, brimming angry purple just above the collar of his tee. A memento of two nights ago. Daniel had fought him off at first, but had relented, allowing Will to render similar punishment below. Will had not waited long before Daniel had returned the favor, with marked ferocity.

He rubs along his collarbone and forces himself to remain in the kitchen, this kitchen.

"You think the frequency is progress, don't you?" Will asks.

"I think it's your mind trying to work through some things. You are consciously aware of searching your memory for answers but I think your subconscious has locked up the memories you want."

"So only my subconscious can unlock them?"

"I think maybe the right stimulus is required for that to happen. Something as emotionally potent as what locked them up in the first place."

"My…trauma in Hannibal's kitchen."

"Well, we don't want to repeat that, but I want to recreate the heightened emotional state that the trauma produced. And it doesn't have to be negative, just powerful."

"That's what you want with the role play."

"Are you ok with that?"

Will considers Daniel's face, the compassion in his eyes quite clear as he waits for Will's answer. Will thinks he has shared more with Daniel than he ever intended already. He has allowed Daniel to know him and Daniel has accepted him as he is, as much as Will has allowed him to see.

Daniel has opened himself up to Will. Opened his home to Will. Made love to Will. Daniel's acceptance of all that Will is has caused Will to accept things about himself. He can feel what Will feels and despite that is willing to subject himself to the madness he must know lies deep inside, locked up in a subconscious fortress.

He’s not certain what Daniel has planned, but he is comfortable sharing whatever it is with him. Will is not so sure that Daniel will be nearly so comfortable with him afterward.

“I’m ok with it, but you might want to reconsider.”

“Nah, I had my chance to back off.” Daniel smiles at him and resumes his preparation.

“That’s a lot of food for two people.”

“Huh? Oh, I always make what the recipe says and Italian food always tastes better the next day. Allows the flavors to set in.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“So, who would you invite?”

“Invite?”

“We’ve got plenty here…who would you invite?”

“Oh, I don’t know…I don’t really know anybody. I suppose D’Angelo would be nice company.”

“The detective? Nice how?” Daniel says, not trusting himself to turn around.

“She’s smart, quite funny actually though I don’t think she intends to be…”

“And pretty.”

“There’s that. But aside from her current occupation, and my former one, we don’t have much in common.”

“Yeah, I can see where maybe dating her would be a conflict of interest.”

“A conflict of…what do you mean? Dating her?”

Daniel enjoys the shift in tone from Will. From conversational to annoyed in an instant. He would like to push a couple more buttons.

“Well, she’s law enforcement and you…operate outside the law. There’s the potential of putting her in a compromising situation. You have a tendency to do that, you know.”

“Do what?’

“Put people in compromising situations. You make people bend the rules for you.”

“I make…who are we talking about here. Her or you?”

“Doesn’t matter does it? I mean it’s not like you would ever ask her out.”

Will shrugs. Daniel is teasing him. He had no doubt felt the attraction to D’Angelo Will had felt that day at the fire scene, but it had been a very emotional day. People often made emotional attachments in times of stress.

“I could ask her out, though.” Daniel pipes up from the stove as he lights a cigarette over the open flame. “No conflict of interest there.”

“You? She doesn’t seem to like you.”

“That’s just strategy.”

“Strategy.” Will huffs, accepting the evil cigarette Daniel proffers.

“Sure. She cuddles up to you, pretends to not like me so she can ask you about me. She uses your apparent concern over why she doesn’t like your friend…”

“My apparent concern?”

“Well yeah, apparent because you like that she prefers you. But you defend me, so you don’t appear to be gloating. She begins to get friendlier with me, you feel better, then, when she shifts allegiance to me, you can’t say anything. It’s perfect. It’s a win win for her.”

Will draws on the cigarette, barely containing the chuckle that slips out with the smoke.

“That…is crazy. She just doesn’t like you.”

“It’s all academic isn’t it? You wouldn’t know what to do with her anyway, if she came to dinner.”

“You know Daniel, it’s too bad we didn’t invite her, just to see what would happen.” Will says more to see what Daniel will say than anything else.

“And if she did, by some miracle, accept an invitation, what do you think would happen? You think I would just leave my own house?”

Will is quiet. Daniel has a point. He sits thinking of possible solutions to their imaginary dilemma.

“I think I would send you out with the dogs. Take them for a walk.” Daniel says, grinning.

“Well, if that’s all the time you would need…hardly worth the effort is it?”

“You know that would not be the case.” Daniel kicks at Will’s feet tucked under his chair.

“Who says anybody has to leave?” Will says, puckering his lips to blow smoke across the table.

The doorbell chimes suddenly and Will jumps in his seat at the sound. He glances at Daniel who is unbelievably checking the wall clock. Will is momentarily paralyzed.

“No…” Will says, feeling color drain from his face.

Daniel walks to the fridge, pretends, actually pretends to be looking for something.

“She’s early. Why don’t you answer the door…Romeo.” He says from inside the fridge.

“Academic my ass…”

Will walks to the front door. The heavy entry door is already wide open and the storm door is all that separates Will from Detective D'Angelo as he approaches. She smiles and waves at him from the porch, holding a slim and wilted paper bag obviously bearing a gift of wine in her hand.

Will opens the door and smiles as best he can, unnerved and trying not to show it. She looks wonderful, very bright in her outfit, decidedly feminine, quite a change from the earth toned outfits of shirts and slacks she wears on duty. And still no makeup, Will notes. She is as fresh and natural as the daisies that spill from the stone pots on either side of Daniel's front porch.

"Let me guess." D'Angelo gushes, "He didn't tell you I was coming. I knew it!"

Will opens the door for her, smells her perfume as she steps inside, and shakes dark locks of scented shiny black hair that falls just to her shoulders. She wears a simple lavender skirt that clings pleasingly to hips and thighs. The thin cotton blouse is unbuttoned past her collarbone, unbuttoned enough to reveal the smooth olive brown skin beneath. Even her sandals are cute. They have little jewels sewn into the leather.

Will thinks a moment. "You have my number…could have warned me."

"And what…spoiled the surprise? Oh, the look on your face…"

"Come on this way, kitchen is back here. What did you bring?"

She catches his eyes and presents him with the wine, pressing the crumpled paper bag into his hands, her dark brown eyes alive, full of light and air and color. Will thinks she is stunning.

"House warming gift. You live here now, eh?"

She tosses her purse and keys on the couch and allows Will to guide her to the kitchen.

"Oh, that was…*delizioso*. And you serve it chilled, not bad for American boy."

D'Angelo sucks hard on her cigarette and tosses her head back to blow the smoke into the heavens. She has smoked all during the meal, one before dinner, one after the ravioli, another one after her salad, and this is the second one she's had in between nibbles of rum cookies. She had also kicked off her sandals after her second glass of wine. Daniel marvels at how she has made herself right at home.

Of course the look on Will's face as she had slipped the leather sandals off her feet and tossed them aside had been worth it. Will's gaze had trailed all the way up her legs, as had Daniel's. D'Angelo is a very sexy woman and she knows it.

"Thanks." Daniel shoves his plate away before he eats something else. It was delicious if he says so himself.

"And no meat, either. You guys vegetarian?"

"Will is."

Will throws him a look. Daniel has been setting him up like this all afternoon. In all fairness, Will is naturally more reserved than Daniel, but he has been holding his own. For Will, it's really more that

Daniel is enjoying the setting up far too much.

D'Angelo seems to be enjoying it, too. She has done her fair share of baiting one of other of them the entire meal. Will realizes he is pretty much just grousing. He is actually having a good time. D'Angelo is…refreshing. Refreshing enough to keep his thoughts from wandering and that is saying something.

"Really, you go vegetarian?"

"It was a lifestyle decision." Will says rolling his eyes at Daniel.

"They say it's more healthy, but I think humans are meant to eat meat. It is the nature of things. Humans have always been hunters."

"And gatherers. I'm taking a sabbatical from hunting." Will says, shoving his plate so it clinks against Daniel's. "Of course, I could always get an appetite for it again."

Daniel looks to his plate and back to Will. "My ravioli not tasty enough for you?"

D'Angelo ashes her cigarette and looks back and forth at the two of them. She knows coded conversation when she hears it. She uses it all the time. And, evidently so do Will and Daniel. They are unusually close for doctor and patient, and she thinks characterizing them as friends could be an understatement.

"It's not a matter of taste as much as discipline." Will says.

"Denial, perhaps?" Daniel says.

"You should hope so." Will smiles and leans back in his chair.

"Ok. I'm missing something here." D'Angelo says.

"No, you're not." Daniel says.

"Be grateful." Will says.

"You two spend way too much time together."

"You have no idea." Daniel says stretching his arms over his head.

"Can you imagine?" Will says, "Being in therapy twenty four seven?"

"All he does is complain." Daniel kicks at Will under the table.

"Maybe you should let him out more." D'Angelo suggests.

"He requires a lot of maintenance. And supervision."

"I'm still sitting here." Will says.

D'Angelo snickers and offers her best doe eyed apology. She holds out her glass. "Refill, please."

Daniel pours D'Angelo, Alia he reminds himself, another glass of the wine she brought. It's a little sweeter than he usually buys, but Italians like their sweet wine, too. He refills Will's glass despite the warning look he receives. He grins and sets the bottle back down without filling his own glass.

He needs to get ready to meet Doctor Dumont and Lydia. He had not wanted Will alone for so much time this weekend, and was grateful Alia could make it. He had not told her that Will needed a baby sitter or that he would be leaving early. As he watches the two of them together, he thinks that was a good move.

D'Angelo is enjoying herself. As she had driven out to Fiesole she had felt anxious about what to expect. She had wanted to see Will again, and under circumstances more pleasant than the last time. Daniel had called her at work, explained that the both of them wanted to thank her for her kindness and would she accept a lunch invitation.

It had seemed innocuous but D'Angelo senses there is more to it. What is making her anxious is that she wants there to be more to it. She sits next to Will and across from Daniel. Maintaining eye contact has been easy with Daniel, not so with Will. He seems distracted though when she directs her conversation to him, he responds with his full attention.

She imagines he can see every flush he causes along her throat and face. When he looks at her with those intense blue eyes she wants to grab his face and smother him with her mouth. And then his file intrudes into her consciousness. Her anxiety goes off the charts.

Although Daniel is a dream to look at he does not make her feel the way Will does. D'Angelo wonders why she is always attracted to the dangerous ones. She starts to take out another cigarette, but stops herself. She is drinking and smoking way too much. She should slow down, keep her wits and make the afternoon last.

"The view from up here is fantastic." D'Angelo says. "I would eat out here every day."

"We often do." Will says turning his head toward Florence and the Duomo gleaming in the sun.

Daniel glances at the sun and sits up straight in his chair. He still hasn't found his watch. The pool doesn't have it and he has torn his house apart looking for it. He can't believe someone stole it. It wasn't anything expensive or fancy. Not to him, anyway.

"Hey, do either of you know what time it is?"

Will isn't wearing his, so Alia glances at her watch, "About three thirty."

"I have to get going."

Will raises his brows but says nothing. Daniel figures he's probably afraid to ask, worried what might come out of his mouth in front of Alia.

"Where do you have to go on a Saturday afternoon? We are having such a good time." Alia pouts.

Alia looks disappointed but Daniel feels both anticipation and anxiety creep along his neck. She does like him, but she clearly likes Will a lot more. Daniel has felt her emotions all afternoon. As a detective, she is practiced at hiding her thoughts and feelings, and she has done an admirable job of maintaining a façade of aloofness here. But Daniel has felt a nervous energy from her and it is all directed at Will.

Daniel is not sure what to make of Will's expression but he feels anxiety from him, too. He sees the daggers in his eyes, but he figures that is just for show. Will will thank him later.

"Work, actually. I have to see a patient, one valley over."

"I didn't know you made house calls." Will says, finally speaking up after thinking about how many different bones there are in the human body and how many of Daniel's he should break.

"Yes, well, not all my patients receive in house therapy, Will." Daniel says standing up.

Will's fingers find his lips as he watches Daniel brush off crumbs from the shorts and shirt he had quickly changed into shortly after Alia had arrived leaving Will and Alia to set the table. He had quite effectively guided the conversation most of her visit. And now, he was going to disappear, leaving Will on his own.

Will is not concerned about being alone with Alia. He is concerned what her expectations are. He hasn't had a chance to ask Daniel what he said to her, by design he thinks, shaking his head.

"What kind of therapy do you do at someone's house that they can't make an appointment?'

"Yeah, Daniel, why can't this patient see you at your office?" Will says.

"Because this patient is receiving canine therapy. I have to pick up the dogs at the kennel, too, before I drive over to the estate."

"Which estate?" Alia asks.

"Oh, uh…shit, I shouldn't have said anything. Well, it's the Fiore Estate, you know it?"

"Villa Fiore, the winery?"

"Yeah… The patient is a referral, of sorts, anyway… I don't do the dog thing at the office. The request to come to the estate was by the patient. I don't usually take the dogs to patients' houses. Too many things can go wrong."

"Why go, then?' Will asks, scrunching his mouth at the sweet wine.

Daniel grins. Will doesn't like the wine, either.

"I mean if being sued for malpractice is a *concern*…" Will says, eyes flashing with the pointed jibe.

Before he can answer, Alia does it for him.

"Fiore money. That's why. It's the daughter, isn't it?"

Daniel looks at Alia like she has two heads. She could certainly use another one if she isn't going to use the one she has.

"You know I can't talk about my patients…"

"Oh lighten up. We've been talking about Will all day…"

Will rubs his face and Daniel feels like doing the same. "Alia! I can't…"

“She’s right, Daniel.” Will says, “You already said too much, so what’s the harm in filling in a couple blanks.”

“You are always getting people to break the rules, Will.” Daniel says.

“I can fill in the blanks. It has to be her. Only daughter, spoiled, troubled, in and out of rehab.”

“She’s got a rap sheet?” Will asks.

Daniel sighs and throws his hands up. “*Avere i coglioni pieni!”*

Alia blinks at Daniel’s outburst and busts out laughing. Will’s brow furrows as he tries to translate and can’t. He’s sure Daniel just cursed.

“Fine! She’s recovering from a suicide attempt and yes, she has some substance abuse issues. Christ!” Daniel says.

“Feel better?” Will asks mildly.

“Much. I’m going to get ready now.” Daniel takes a long breath and shakes his finger at both of them. “You two are awful. You know that, right?”

Daniel had left wearing not a suit, but more dog appropriate attire. Will had thought he had pulled off a casual professional look quite well. He had noticed D’Angelo’s admiring glances as Daniel had walked down the drive to his garage.

Will and D’Angelo had offered to clean up so Daniel would not be late to his appointment. After doing that they had walked the dogs and had returned to sit on the couch inside having had quite enough sun for the day. Will had suddenly found he had run out of things to talk about with D’Angelo, or Alia as she had insisted more than once.

He sits beside her on the couch, comfortable with the quiet interlude and confident that she will come up with something to talk about very soon. She has been unfailingly adept at doing so thus far.

“What did you say to the Paolini twins? They like dropped off the earth. I’m not complaining especially since I don’t need them as an excuse to call you.”

“They were an excuse? I thought your boss…”

“I uh…exaggerated, a little.”

Alia holds up her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. Will copies her, but his finger and thumb are much farther apart. She laughs.

“You know I like being with you, like this.” Alia says, smiling and hoping for one from Will.

Will smiles back. He’s not sure how friendly he should be at the moment. “By this, you mean alone?”

"Yeah… I enjoyed lunch, don't get me wrong, but I'm glad Daniel had an appointment. So we can talk."

"You do understand he knew he had an appointment when he invited you. What did he say anyway?"

"That you, and him…he, ugh! Both of you wanted to thank me for my help. So, here I am. You can thank me now."

Alia brazenly touches his knee and looks up at Will, all smiles. Will thinks she has not stopped smiling since Daniel left.

"You were very helpful that day. About the fire…" Will ignores the finger tips circling his knee. "I got the list from Rossi's insurance company you sent. I guess it wasn't enough to concern the fire marshal."

"No."

"Did you ever find the cat?"

"The cat?"

Alia's hand falls away and she sits up straight.

"Rossi's cat. There was no evidence of the cat."

"Will, her apartment was torched up. You saw it. It is possible the cat was, uh…extinguished."

"Bones don't burn. The cat got out. Either through the front door because she let it out, or it got out by accident. If it got out through a window that would be odd because the a/c was on…"

"You really don't let anything go, do you?"

Will sighs and looks aside, pressing his lips together. She's right. He obsesses on details.

Alia considers Will's question. The fire marshal had declared it accidental, faulty wiring and so on, but the list of appliances in Rossi's insurance policy had been few. Unless she had plugged everything she owned into that one outlet, it seems a bit of a stretch that the circuit had overloaded. There had been a lot of unidentified material at the point of origin. And a large fan. That was an odd thing to plug in when the a/c was running.

"You know, I will look into the cat. What did it look like? I can check local shelters for it. It might still be there."

"Orange tabby, male. Sort of answered to the name of Hercules. I think he had a charm on his collar, might have had his name on it." Will grins, "Thanks for humoring me."

"No problem. You like it here, huh? Not looking for your own place?"

"No…this is working out well, with my therapy and all."

Alia glances around the room, attention drawn to the piano and violin that sets atop the piano, forgotten in the rush to take a run and prepare food.

“You play?”

“He plays both, I just play piano.”

“Oh…a musician. You are full of surprises.”

If you only knew… “We all have our little hidden talents I suppose.”

Alia shifts on the couch, edges closer to Will. She feels pleasantly inebriated. She would tell anyone in her condition not to drive. She wants to get physical with Will, be intimate. She knows her feelings are due in part to the alcohol, but the attraction is there. She feels it and she feels it from him.

She considers he is a little shy and perhaps out of practice. Everything she has learned about him indicates he has been to hell and back. He is in therapy for it. He is not the most sociable of people and from what Daniel told her, there is a very good reason for that.

If he can read people so well, he should already know how she feels about him. Alia knows she cannot begin to fathom how Will’s gift works, but she has seen him in action. She knows he has stolen glances at her all afternoon and has likely created an image of her in his mind like he does with the killers he hunts. That he remains on the couch with her suggests to Alia that Will wants her to be on the couch with him.

Will seems to her either a walking contradiction or a scapegoat for the FBI. He presents as nothing like what she has read about him. She decides his therapy must be going well.

“You uh, don’t see any conflict living with your psychiatrist?”

Will shifts in the cushions, not away from Alia, but because he feels himself becoming coiled up inside with the question. He can’t blame her for being curious, but his relationship with Daniel needs to be discreet for lots of reasons, not the least of which is Daniel’s reputation. Then again, it was Daniel’s idea to invite her over here. He must trust her, or trust Will to handle it.

“Well, I’m not officially his patient anymore. So, that conflict doesn’t exist.”

“But, you’re still in therapy.”

“Unofficially, yes.”

Alia brings her knees up to fold under her body and leans into Will. She lifts a finger to his face and traces the tips along the whiskers. She smiles as he turns his head toward her, eyes down and lips parted to speak. She touches her fingers to his lips, feels the breath warm upon them. She feels warm all over.

“Kiss me.” Alia says simply after editing away everything else she imagined saying to him.

Will lets her fingers caress his lips for a moment, the sensation sending heat up and down his spine. He bends his head down to press his lips against hers, his fingers caress the smooth skin of her cheeks and trail through the silky locks of hair. He feels her breasts skim across his shirt and desire stirs below. He aches to touch the supple sun kissed skin beneath her blouse, to feel her body yield beneath his.

Before he succumbs to the promise of those lips, Will pulls back and looks into her surprised face. He can't do this with her. This…is too much reality for him. She will form attachments. He doesn't need another person trying to save him and he knows Alia would try. She is a good person and Will knows what happens to good people when he becomes involved with them. He already has Daniel to deal with.

"Alia, I can't." Will's voice cracks as he speaks. He feels terrible.

"Why not? The attraction is there…I feel it. So do you."

"I do, but that's not enough."

"Why? What does enough look like?"

"Alia…"

"You mean your therapy isn't working? You aren't…getting better?"

"I'm trying. Daniel is…an excellent psychiatrist. I'm saying I can't…offer you what you want."

"You don't know what I want. We have a lot in common to start. You are looking for a bad guy. I catch bad guys, too."

"Alia," Will says, his hands bracing her shoulders, "I'm in therapy because I am one of the bad guys."

Alia sits still, her brown eyes searching his and Will sees the stubbornness there, the hurt. He recognizes she took a risk, made the first move, but she is also tipsy. They both are. And as much as Will would like to make love to her, he knows he shouldn't.

"I guess I'm attracted to the bad guys." She lifts her chin and presses her lips close to his mouth, again.

"I wouldn't be good for you. Trust me."

Will is acutely aware of the effect his words will have on Alia but the words are truth. They are bitter medicine that she is going to have to swallow. He has watched the flush of alcohol color her cheeks as they have talked. They blush now with indignation. Will has wounded her pride. It won't occur to her until tomorrow that she opened the wound herself.

"Ok." She says suddenly, swinging her legs out from beneath her. She throws her hands up and shrugs towards the front door. "I'm going to use the bathroom and then I am going to leave."

"Alia, don't be like that…" Will starts to rise from the couch but Alia is already stomping up the stairs. He hears the door to the bathroom slam shut.

Will doesn't go after her. He rubs at his face and sinks back into the couch. He groans at the thought that she had used the downstairs bathroom before. She is a cop and she will snoop. It is her nature. Even though the doors are closed upstairs, she will be unable to resist opening one or all of them.

He can't let her drive, not yet anyway. He doubts she will let him call her a cab and even if he did; she would refuse to get in it. He gets up and walks over to Daniel's sound system and hits play. He doesn't care what's already loaded. He needs something to listen to as he waits for Alia to come back downstairs. He will have to fix this, one way or another.

Will sighs. This used to be so much easier. The afternoon had started out so well…

Du Maurier parks her white Mercedes E350 in front of the guest house. She climbs out and waits for Clayton to pull up beside her in the transport van from the kennel. The dogs bark wildly until Clayton climbs out of the front seat and walks around back to slip each of them a treat and coo them down. She watches them circle and finally settle down in their crates.

She is pleased with this afternoon's session. Clayton handled everything perfectly. Including Lydia's father, Signor Fiore. No easy task. She finds Signor Fiore tiresome and traditional. Clayton had wisely appealed to his machismo and had the Signor eating out of his hand with regard to Lydia and her continued canine therapy. Du Maurier had been impressed and perplexed with the ease Clayton had seemed to manipulate the older man into doing exactly what he wanted, for his patient.

Du Maurier reminds herself that Clayton had put Lydia's interests above all else, except for the dogs he had brought. Du Maurier thinks that were there a contest between rescuing Lydia or the dogs, Clayton would choose the dogs. She can't fault him for that; she might be tempted to do the same.

She had found convincing Clayton to join her at the guest house much easier than convincing him to have a drink with her at the pool. She had reconsidered her approach to the intriguing Clayton, inferring from their last meeting that he did not respond favorably to ego stroking and was keenly aware of the behaviors of people he interacted with. Intuitively so, he didn't even seem to think about it.

He did respond to distress. He also responded to perceived honesty. Honesty is such a nebulous concept; accepted by most as an absolute pure thing, as though one can easily recognize it. It is actually one of the most malleable of concepts, a sister to truth and defined entirely by the beholder.

Clayton appears to have some sort of honesty meter residing in his head and Du Maurier is confident that she has determined its standard of measurement. The fact that Clayton is here, prepared to drink and relax with her is proof enough of Du Maurier's grasp of Clayton's mind.

She fully intends to grasp some other things about him before he leaves this evening. First, she would like to learn about Graham if she can persuade him to discuss his precious patient. Du Maurier finds it vaguely irritating that so many people fall over themselves trying to protect Graham when it is perfectly obvious it is they who need the protecting.

Clayton has no idea what his association with Graham is going to cost him.

Daniel walks around the van to greet Du Maurier. He is mentally exhausted from the constant barrage of emotion he has felt all afternoon from not only his patient, but her father, and her mother. The entire family belongs in therapy, or on tv. Lydia is in clinical terms…a complete mess and she has her parents to thank for it.

Clayton accepted Du Maurier's invitation to unwind before taking the dogs back partly because he needs to talk to someone. If he doesn't vent a little before driving back home, he will not be able to contend with Will, or Alia if she is still there. He wonders how Will's afternoon went after he left.

He rubs his hands the entire length of his face as he walks up to Du Maurier. He rolls his eyes at her droll expression.

"That was…insane." Daniel says, "How can you stand it, day in and day out?"

"I am glad you saw it with your own eyes. That little display this afternoon is but a taste of what I live with when I am here."

"I take it you are paid outrageously for that."

"Quite. Otherwise…" Du Maurier lets her sentence finish itself.

"Ordinarily, I'm not such a mercenary but, Christ, what is it with rich people? Ugh…" Daniel pauses, takes a moment to just breathe, "I feel…drained."

"Well, come on inside. I think I have something that will help soothe your nerves. We are at a winery, *non siamo noi*?"

"*Quindi siamo*. Let's drink."

Hannibal watches Clayton follow Du Maurier inside the guest house from his secluded vantage point in the trees that line the perimeter of the yard. Figuring out which of the guest houses sprinkled along this graveled drive was as easy as gaining access to the winery itself.

Tours of the wineries are inexpensive if not free. Tourists are expected to make a purchase before they leave if the tour is free, but taking a tour, even by oneself is almost never denied. The challenge is finding the winery.

The older more established wineries do not advertise and they sit off the beaten path, usually at the end of a long winding gravel filled road with not so much as a sign posted. Hannibal had passed the entrance to this one twice despite his GPS. He suspects he may not be using it properly. He may have to talk to Tatiana about that.

Once he had completed the tour up to the point where he discovered the location of the guest houses, Hannibal had quietly wandered off as the guests were encouraged to do. Villa Fiore is one of the oldest wineries in Tuscany and it had been a time honored tradition to allow guests to roam freely around the estate provided an adequate supply from its cellars was purchased. Hannibal had ordered enough to ensure he could traverse the estate in its entirety uninterrupted.

There are many guest houses along this back road, but Hannibal had surmised Du Maurier would not walk to the main house for the canine therapy. He knows her car and it was a simple process of elimination to scout the guest house without a white Mercedes but equipped with a hot tub. Du Maurier seems to have caught her fish this evening, but Hannibal has yet to see if she can pry him off the hook.

The guest house is quaint and rustic, equipped with modern amenities like electricity and the requisite hot tub Hannibal can see sunken into the deck of the back porch. Hannibal is most curious to see if she can persuade Clayton to get into it. He is not easily manipulated. If Hannibal has deduced anything about the young doctor it is that he does not do anything he does not want to do. He is tactful and friendly, disarmingly so, and Hannibal had found it a welcome challenge to manipulate him into talking about himself.

Du Maurier desires to manipulate him into doing much more than talking.

The lovely little house has plenty of windows providing an adequate showcase for a study of the human condition, an irresistible opportunity for inquiring minds such as Hannibal's. The secreted spot among the trees is far too removed from the subjects of his study Hannibal decides. He walks head up in the late afternoon sun as though strolling about the vineyard, as though he should be exactly where he is.

Alia stands in front of the mirror in the claustrophobic bathroom staring at herself with a critical eye. As she applies a dampened tissue beneath her eyes she thinks she is quite drunk. She behaved unforgivably downstairs. She was, as her mama would say, raised better than that.

But she wants Will so badly she can taste it. She wants him in ways she can't believe. The wine seems to have set her body on fire. She has always liked wine. Too much. She has always liked the bad boys, too. She has always liked…boys. Will is no boy, but he looks like one. As for being bad, he probably has done some bad things trying to catch all those killers for the FBI. She has broken a few rules herself, done things on the job she is not particularly proud of, but she tries to do the right thing. Clearly, Will does too, or he wouldn't be in therapy.

He can think like killers, like this Ripper he chases and he sees Daniel to help him get them out of his head. Alia wants to smack herself but she slaps the mirror instead. She should be more understanding. He was trying to be a gentleman downstairs and she was very pushy. Mama says she is always too pushy.

Alia takes a deep breath and opens the door to return downstairs and apologize when she notices the doors are all closed. She can hear music downstairs. Will is still waiting for her. He put on music to wait. She thinks that must be a good thing. She hesitates at the bathroom then decides to check out the bedrooms.

She opens the door on her left and finds a stairway. She remembers Daniel's house has a third floor. She closes that door and moves on to the next, quietly opening it. Nothing remarkable in here, she thinks. The bed is made up with a quilt thrown over it. There is a dresser which she opens to find socks and underclothes neatly folded. The other drawers contain a few shirts and shorts. She realizes these must be Will's. The closet is empty.

She closes the door and crosses the hallway and opens the door to what must be Daniel's bedroom. She blinks her eyes as she catalogs what she sees. When she has seen enough, she backs out the door and shuts it. She collects her thoughts before walking back downstairs, to Will.

Will paces in front of the living room windows. He rubs at the back of his neck, feeling the tension that always precipitates a headache. His head is throbbing a little from the wine, but mostly it's throbbing because of Alia. He hears her footsteps on the hardwood and turns around to greet her. His headache kicks into full gear as soon as he sees her face. He lifts his head and waits.

"You're sleeping with him. You're sleeping with your psychiatrist." Her words fall flat, monotone. Matter of fact words, like a cop would say them.

Alia stares him down. She stands at the bottom of the steps unable or unwilling to take a step further. Will looks to the floor, his thoughts in a jumble.

He can't tell her why he sleeps with Daniel. He can't tell her that his nightmares are so visceral that he wakes up terrified and sweating. That his psychiatrist is so empathic that he can lie next to Will and take up some of the emotional slack so Will can manage a few hours of actual sleep. That sex with him allows Will to fall asleep in the first place because the sex reminds him of the sex he had with the psychopath he is trying to catch. That the intimacy they share is unique. That Will has feelings for him…

She will think him insane. And he is.

Will cannot tell her any of those things. He can only acknowledge that yes, he does sleep with his psychiatrist, only he doesn't pay him for it anymore. Will wishes the floor would just swallow him up, but he manages to lift his head and meet Alia's eyes.

"Is that the reason you aren't good for me?" She asks quietly.

"No."

"You don't like me that way?'

"I like you just fine. Alia, I'm not…" Will searches for the right word, a word other than stable, or sane. "I'm not *emotionally* available."

"And physically? What if I don't care about that." She nods her head toward the top of the stairs. "It doesn't have to mean anything, Will. We could just…"

"It always means something. At least…it should." Will sighs and holds out his hands, feeling defeated, like he just got the wind knocked out of him. "I meant it when I said I wouldn't be good for you. It…this wouldn't be fair, to you."

"Maybe you should let me decide what is fair or good for me, eh?"

Alia grabs her keys and purse from the table stalks out the door, slams it shut behind her. She slows her pace as she approaches her car. She takes deep breaths as she holds her keys in her hands.

Will considers going after her, but doesn't want to make a scene out front, more of a scene than Alia just provided. He figures that she has driven her car many times under the influence. Most cops work hard and play hard. He tells himself she will be fine. He sinks again into the cushions and glances around for Cara and Bella. They are in the kitchen, ears up and obviously alert and edgy. Not surprising with all the shouting and the testiness in the air.

The front door bursts open and Alia slams the storm door and then the heavy wood door behind her. She throws her keys and purse to the rug and walks purposely over to Will, unbuttoning her blouse as she walks.

"Alia…" Will begins but she places her finger across his lips.

"Maybe, maybe I'll be good for you. Did you ever think about that?"

Will doesn't answer, not with words. He wraps his hands around her waist and pulls her on top of him and crushes his mouth against hers as she wriggles out of her blouse, then bra…

Chapter End Notes

Chapters 48 and 49 are like a two part episode.

Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

> Will and Alia enjoy the rest of their afternoon while Daniel is treated to Du Maurier's brand of hospitality. And Hannibal? Hannibal is Hannibal.
>
> "Hannibal!"
>
> Du Maurier notices the slump of Clayton's body. She looks to Hannibal, alarm growing every second.
>
> "I know. He's not breathing. As expected. We have time. Where do you keep your manual resuscitator? Surely you have one if you intend to drug your dates. I doubt you want me to perform a tracheotomy."
>
> Du Maurier does not answer but runs to the bathroom.

Chapter 49

Will and Alia enjoy the rest of their afternoon while Daniel is treated to Du Maurier's brand of hospitality. And Hannibal? Hannibal is Hannibal.

Daniel stands on the back deck of Dumont's guest house looking out over the expanse of Villa Fiore that stretches to the horizon along rolling hills that dip and roll like an ocean of vine and bramble. He thinks not even this view can compensate for the Fiore brand of crazy that awaits Dumont every day while she remains on the estate. After spending the afternoon with the family, Daniel can understand why he is such a welcome diversion for Dumont. He wouldn't want his existence confined to these people either.

Rich people are often the worst patients because in addition to their psychological disorders, they are afflicted with money.

He takes a sip from the large glass of Fiore's finest white, a Sauvignon variety grown around the olive groves and hazelnut trees that grace the valley.

Of course Dumont claims to taste the subtle notes of olive and hazelnut, but Daniel's palate is much less refined and to him it is pleasantly crisp and most importantly, supremely chilled. She has placed a tray of snacks on the thick cut glass table to nosh on.

He munches on the focaccia crisps, laden with sea salt and a hint of lemon. There is dip and a large plate of antipasto. Daniel notes with mild amusement that there are neither onions nor garlic in evidence. And one cannot miss the large and noisy in-ground hot tub looming from the other end of the deck.

“I haven’t seen you at the gym in a while.” Dumont calls from the kitchen.

“Yeah, my work schedule has been disrupted recently. I’ll get back into it.”

Daniel has no idea when that will be. Will won’t go to the gym and Daniel could go alone like he always has, but he likes running with Will. He hasn’t wanted to work out at the gym when he has weights and Will at his house.

“What kind of disruption?”

Du Maurier walks up to the table with a basket of crusty sliced bread she sets down next to the antipasto. She uses a slice to scoop up some of the antipasto onto a plate. She is certain Clayton will deflect. He has no reason to tell another psychiatrist that he is treating a patient while sleeping with him.

“Some changes around my house and my practice. Nothing major…just time consuming.”

“I look forward to seeing you there again. Obviously, I need to go, for my own good.”

“After today, I guess I’d be in there all the time, too.”

Daniel had accepted her invitation to unwind with a glass of wine before returning the dogs to the kennel because he needs to unwind. But, standing here on the deck with her, the emotional fall out this afternoon is compounded by the tension he feels in the air and throughout his being. The anticipation gnaws at him, teeth scraping along naked bones.

He feels it every time their eyes meet. Their eyes had conferred a lot today, communicating about their patient in silent signals to each other as Daniel had observed Lydia’s behavior. Daniel had sensed the restlessness in Dumont. But, he had also witnessed her devotion to her patient despite the overbearing personality of Signor Fiore. Fiore is very traditional particularly in his attitudes about women. Daniel can imagine how frustrating it is for Dumont, an obviously educated and modern woman to navigate through the old world chauvinism in order to treat the daughter.

It is no wonder he feels frustration from her, and no surprise that she seeks solace or distraction in him. As soon as they had reached the deck, Dumont had left him there and wasted no time opening a bottle of wine in the kitchen. Daniel had felt her entire being relax as she had thrown her head back and taken a long drink from the wide mouthed glass. He wishes it were that easy for him.

He knows the source of her anticipation sits twelve feet away, surrounded by potted flowers with a few deep pink rose petals bubbling in the swirling jets of water. And, excitement is not the only emotion he feels from Dumont.

The animal magnetism she wears like cologne around him seeps into Daniel’s awareness, the essence of her unfolding into something palpable upon his tongue. He is emotionally exhausted from the therapy and though Dumont’s primary emotion is singularly focused on him, Daniel welcomes the simplicity of it. He can handle sexual desire from her.

He thinks about the sexual tension that had sizzled between Will and Alia when had left them standing in the doorway like a couple of teenagers. Allowing them some time alone is also part of his reason for accepting Dumont’s invitation. The charge of nervous energy between them had been spontaneous and sweet; quite unlike this dance with Dumont. The thought of Will and the pretty little detective screwing on his sofa sends a smile to his face.

Will's feelings have a tendency to cling to him, like a sprinkling of dust he cannot brush away. Not all of Will's feelings send him smiling.

Daniel is aware that he seems to become more attuned to Will all the time, even when they are apart and the thought is both comforting and troubling. His own brand of empathy has been instrumental in helping Will, but the effects of his constant and intimate contact with Will continue to accumulate. He is less and less able to separate his own feelings from Will's. His shield doesn't seem to protect him from the swell of emotions around him like it used to.

He's not sure if the desire to slam Dumont against the stone and cement wall and fuck her silly is his own, Will's, or hers.

He decides he thinks about his feelings too much. Daniel thinks he should be thinking about the very hot and bothered psychiatrist circling him like a lioness stalking her prey upon the Serengeti. Daniel scoops up some of the antipasto onto a seasoned crispy flatbread and munches, considering how he should handle Dumont.

"Well, so much for pro bono. Guess you have to put up with being paid." She says softly, touching his arm as she meanders around the table.

Du Maurier smiles as she slips some more antipasto onto her plate. She eats with her fingers, delicately sucking on her fingertips after every mouthful. Clayton's eyes follow her every move. Though his attentions are encouraging, she thinks it would be more encouraging if he would drink his wine more quickly.

Daniel grins, "I feel like I'm taking their money. And it's a lot of money. I'm…I would never have asked for that…"

"I know how Fiore is. He loves his daughter. Lydia likes you. She likes the dogs. Fiore will buy her whatever she wants."

Daniel falls silent, considering again what he has agreed to. Signor Fiore had quoted Daniel a figure to continue consulting that had left him open mouthed and looking to Du Maurier who had shrugged and looked aside, a knowing smile on her pretty face. Daniel had been offended by the blatant bribery. His compassion for the troubled daughter had tipped the scales for him.

"It's more than double what I would normally charge." Daniel scratches at whiskers that prickle under his chin. Dumont is making him prickle everywhere.

"Don't worry, you'll earn it. You may not see the results you'd like with your patient, but you will earn every penny." She pauses, "We'll be working together for a little while. How do you feel about that?"

She shakes her hair so it falls around her bare shoulders. She wears a flowing sleeveless dress that buttons down the front and falls almost to her knees. Daniel watches her slip her leather sandals over glossy manicured toenails and toss them aside. She stands between the railing and the table, radiating sex like a neon sign. She has already finished off her glass of wine.

Du Maurier picks up her abandoned glass from the table and pours herself another. Clayton's glass is nearly full. He is being especially obdurate, almost as if he knows what she wants and is defying her, stubbornly refusing to play even though he accepted the invitation. She gestures towards Clayton's nearly full glass sitting on the table.

“How do you feel about it?” Daniel says, ignoring his wine for the moment.

Du Maurier blinks as Clayton joins her at the railing. He stands in front of her feet apart and pins her against it, the wood pressing uncomfortably into her back. He grinds his hips against her and places his tanned and muscular arms on either side of her. She looks up into his face and sees Graham in the twist of his smile. Sees his unpredictable nature rearing itself in Clayton. She reminds herself this is not Graham. He is a means to finishing Graham once and for all.

This evening is a complete indulgence for Du Maurier. She will bend and break Clayton to later use him to incite Graham to take his vengeance on Hannibal. Doctor Clayton will be eating out her hand after this evening, in a manner of speaking.

The cocktail Clayton should be imbibing right now has been carefully calibrated; one of Du Maurier’s specially crafted creations for the occasion and Clayton should remain lucid and highly suggestible before eventually capitulating to the sedative completely. Clayton should also provide Du Maurier with information about Graham’s mental state and perhaps what Graham has shared with him about Hannibal.

If all goes well Du Maurier will have access to Clayton’s body and mind. Graham will have to do without his company this evening.

Du Maurier had opted for the liquid GHB rather than the Rohypnol deciding that the Rohypnol would last too long and she prefers Clayton remain unaware he was slipped anything. The assortment of snacks he has tasted should confuse his palate enough so the drug remains undetected in the delicious wine. The evidence in his urine will have been flushed down the toilet by this time tomorrow, and Clayton will be none the wiser.

He is a psychiatrist himself and even though he likely has not taken any of the drugs Du Maurier is introducing, he is not unfamiliar with the effects and might recognize overt symptoms in himself. He might, at the very least, question the effects anyway. Once the cocktail has reached its peak efficacy, he will not remember anything other than what Du Maurier wants him to remember, but she must ensure he suspects nothing until then.

Even without the drugs kicking in, Clayton’s behavior is already promising. Du Maurier can appreciate his libido unharnessed as it is now, but she prefers to enjoy him in a more submissive mode.

“Why don’t you join me in the hot tub and I’ll show you.” Du Maurier purrs, holding wine glass aloft in one hand while starting at the buttons on Clayton’s shirt with the other. “But first, drink your wine before it spoils. No glass around the tub.”

Daniel has every intension of scratching Dumont’s sizable itch. Daniel thinks she could use a little therapy. He longs to bury that smug little face of hers between his legs, give her something else to suck on besides the fingers she keeps dipping into the antipasto.

Lydia was not the only person Daniel observed today. Dumont has plenty of issues of her own. The need to control is foremost among them extending even to this simple encounter on the deck. Daniel feels the cool calculation couched in every gesture, feels the *design* lurking beneath her words. There is artifice where there should be spontaneity.

Daniel thinks he will introduce a little spontaneity right now. Her smooth naked shoulders brush against his arms and he wants to take his shirt off so he can feel her skin next to his. His skin chaffs inside his cotton shirt, and his boxers cleave to skin that tingles and bristles at the constraint.

Daniel reaches around to retrieve his wine. He quaffs down the entire glass and slams it on the table. He had only intended to drink one glass with her anyway. That was a huge glass by any standard.

“Better?” he says, “You’ve been dick teasing all day. Why don’t you ask me how I feel about that?”

Du Maurier’s eyes widen. Her thoughts whirl as she is pulled, fairly dragged away from the railing to be pressed up against cement and stone, her feet almost suspended off the boards of the deck. The textured wall cuts cold and hard into her back. She is thrilled at this side of the polite and reserved Doctor Clayton.

His skin is warm and soft as her leg brushes his bare calf. He glances down at her feet and his eyes take their time finding their way back up to her face. She smiles again at him as thoughts of his mouth between her legs cause her to tighten her thighs and grind against him.

She tries to wriggle from his grasp but the hands pinning her wrists to the wall are sure and strong. He was not supposed to drink the wine in one gulp like that. She can only guess that the effects should hit Clayton sooner rather than later.

“I’d rather ask you in the hot tub…”

“Yes, I know. But we aren’t getting in the hot tub.”

“And why is that?”

Her sultry pouting lips tease at Daniel’s mouth. He pulls away.

“Because you want me to.”

She feels Clayton’s hands about her waist, then the curve of her ass as the fabric shimmies up, hands separating cheeks, kneading the flesh. He leans into her mouth, stops just short of actually pressing his lips to hers.

“I just wanted some conversation and some wine. What do you want…Francesca, is it? ” Daniel says trailing a finger beneath her chin and along her throat.

“Cesca.” Du Maurier says, emphasizing the ‘ch’. “I want…this.”

She pulls him to her, sinks her hands into his hair, grabbing thick curls. The touch of whiskers at her chin sends her grinding against him. His kisses are languid, stretching her mouth wide as his hands move to the front. He hikes the dress up and reaches a hand between her legs.

“Cesca…”

He gasps softly as his fingers caress the flesh there causing her to shiver at the touch. He shivers too. His cock twitches. Dumont is completely smooth. He smiles into her throat, feels the throb in his cock.

“Fuck. You waxed…everything? Oh god…” Daniel breathes into her neck.

He nuzzles and bites at her throat, as his fingers explore from tailbone to pelvis. His fingers open moist flesh like dewy flower petals. Daniel thinks he has got to get her horizontal and quickly. The feel of hairless skin beneath his fingers cinches it. Dumont has sent him over the edge with that.

Du Maurier feels his cock stiffen against her thighs. His fingers can't get enough of her. He is all hers. Clayton appears to have a fetish for shaved fish judging by the tightness of fabric gathering at his crotch. She wonders if that kink works both ways.

She lets him guide her inside, to the living room. The tub can wait. He couldn't do this to her underwater anyway.

Daniel's neck radiates with heat that flushes upward clear to the hairs on his head. He thinks it must be the wine causing his face to feel so hot. The flush feels different than sunburn; though he is sure he received plenty of exposure to the sun this afternoon. The need to get out of his clothes is maddening.

Du Maurier reclines on the couch watching Clayton undress on top of her. His fingers pluck at her buttons impatiently as he bends to kiss her. She helps him unbutton and peel off his shirt, as he tugs at twill shorts that fit too snugly to come off as quickly as he wants. The tanned muscles ripple in the late afternoon light as he finally wrests the troublesome shorts and boxers from his feet and crouches over her. Clayton is as amply endowed as she had hoped he would be.

His cock juts out from his thatch of black hair, reminding her of her fantasy with Graham not so long ago. Clayton has no scar to mar his perfect physique. But, she notices the golden skin beneath her fingertips is not entirely unblemished. He flinches as she touches the bruise along his collarbone. She runs her hands over his body, pectorals firm, nipples erect and abdomen tight against her hands. She traces her fingers along the line of downy hair to stroke him and his face crumbles in pleasure.

She notes the bruises at his hips and between his legs.

She considers this. Hannibal is demanding in the bedroom and prone to similar displays of… affection. He is not easily or quickly satisfied. Graham apparently satisfied him. It would appear that Clayton satisfies Graham. And Graham satisfies him.

She grinds her thumbs into the twin bruises on his hips, and watches him wince then smile. Her thumbs are too small to cover the bruises but the imprint matches perfectly. Du Maurier flushes with excitement and hooks her arms around Clayton's neck and shoulders to pull him close. She will leave her own mark on him.

As she turns her head to draw Clayton's flesh between her teeth, she sees the long dark shadows from the trees outside shift in the room and she almost starts from the couch. There is a shadow in the far corner that has no business being there.

Hannibal.

Of course he was unable to stay away. Already possessive. Du Maurier hopes he eats his own heart out by the time she is finished with Clayton this evening. Hannibal will imagine it is Graham with her; he will not be able to help himself. At last, Du Maurier can tread on the memory; can taint the pure images of him Hannibal keeps in his memory palace and renders compulsively in his sketch book.

Intellectually, Hannibal will separate Clayton from Graham, but emotionally…he will be compromised. The thoughts tumble. Clayton fumbles on top of her, steadies himself between the cushions.

Du Maurier observes the ruddy flush bloom all over Clayton's skin. She knows he must be feeling very warm by now. As he stares into her face she sees the dilated pupils, the green almost edged out by black, restraint all but gone. He breathes through his mouth, softs gasps between the kisses he delivers along her throat and collarbone.

"Here…"

She breathes into his ear as she pushes his face into her breasts. He is already lost in the sensation of her skin against his as he laps at the beads of perspiration between Dumont's breasts. His tongue licks at her nipples and the nip of his teeth sends pleasure rippling the length of her body as she twists beneath him.

He kneels over her, body bent in half as he works his way lower, tongue trailing along her stomach, lower still and Du Maurier moans with pleasure at the touch of his wet tongue on the smooth exposed skin.

She shudders in anticipation clear down to her toes, toes that curl as the cool air touches hairless skin that prickles with every pass of Clayton's tongue. His mouth upon her clit is utterly delightful. Du Maurier closes her eyes as she contracts and releases muscles causing a pleasant pulse against that wonderful mouth.

Daniel cannot think, his head is thick like cement. He feels the wet and silky flesh slide against his tongue, feels Dumont quiver in satisfaction as his lips open her wide, teasing the clit with gentle stabs that send her off the couch. He lifts his head and licks his fingers, takes his cock in his hands. He feels dizzy with the thought of coming inside her.

Du Maurier pushes his head back down. He resists, head stubbornly poised above her pelvis. She knows he wants to slip his cock inside, wants it more than anything. Knowing he squirms uncomfortable and unsated while he pleases her is part of the experience.

"Not yet." she murmurs into soft curls as she guides him back down.

Daniel is twisting from the inside out. He feels her pleasure as though it is his own, his body responding in kind. He feels the swell of his balls, the ache that precedes release. His head spins though he knows he isn't moving. He doesn't think he can finish her without losing control. He feels so very hot; all of his extremities are hyper sensitive, alive and throbbing. The tip of his cock grows wet between his fingers as he slips his tongue once more between Dumont's legs, feels the tightening of muscles as he licks and stabs at swollen smooth lips.

Du Maurier feels the luscious pop that sends waves of pleasure cascading as she grinds against Clayton's mouth, body lifting from cushions.

Suddenly, his mouth slips away and she hears him groan. She opens her eyes to see him hunched over, hands clenching his cock his body in spasms, breathing erratic and sharp. He stretches out over her with some difficulty as he shudders uncontrollably into his sticky glazed hands.

"I'm sorry…" he breathes, "I…couldn't…"

He pants into her ear, body shaking not from pleasure but convulsions. She begins to wriggle out from beneath him, sensing something is wrong. Clayton is suddenly hauled off of her from behind and repositioned over the couch so his head dangles off the well cushioned arm.

Hannibal stands over her, his face placid.

“What did you give him?” Hannibal asks. “Whatever it is, he is reacting badly.”

Du Maurier scrambles off the couch and bends down to look at Clayton. Though his body trembles, his eyes roll back in his head. He does not respond to the gentle probing of his nose and mouth. He is going to require medical intervention of a kind she knows academically. She’s not a surgeon. Her jaw tightens as she looks up at Hannibal, who is.

“I’m sure you have some idea. I don’t know what went wrong.” She looks at Clayton and closes her eyes. “I would appreciate your expertise. We can discuss your boundary issues later.”

“How fortunate for you, and for him, that I renegotiated our boundaries.”

Du Maurier huffs, unbelieving Hannibal had nothing to do with Clayton’s collapse. She does not put it past him to interfere. This is just the sort of theatricality that appeals to him.

Hannibal kneels down in front of Clayton to have a look. He feels the damp head, sees perspiration beads all over him despite the chill of his flesh. He checks Clayton’s pulse, holding his fingers against his carotid. Clayton’s pulse is weak, dangerously so.

Hannibal knows that Du Maurier’s intentions were to control Clayton, not kill him, but he will die without intervention. He could leave Du Maurier to her mess, her miscalculation. She will believe Hannibal interfered. He did not. He already has her code. He is curious about her plan. He has the twins to deal with. He has to find Will.

He came here for insight, and Hannibal has found more than he imagined.

Clayton will be dead in a matter of minutes and Hannibal thinks Clayton deserves better than to die like this, his scandalous demise would be splashed all over the local papers. Du Maurier's picture would be in the papers, too. Hannibal would not have this fate for him. He makes his decision quickly. Du Maurier will have to deal with the consequences on her own. Clayton will not remember Hannibal was even here.

“He drank the entire glass at once. He hasn’t metabolized all of it so we need to get him to vomit.” Hannibal says, arranging Clayton appropriately over the couch.

“He’s not breathing right.”

“No, and he will stop breathing soon enough. I need to get him to vomit before his organs become too sedated to function on their own.”

Hannibal pulls Clayton up and straddles him from behind, his knees anchoring him to the couch so that he holds Clayton over the side. He forces two fingers down his throat, feels him stiffen against him, fighting the gag reflex. Hannibal pushes his fingers deeper until Clayton spews up the contents of his stomach all over Du Maurier’s cream colored rug.

He vomits several times before Hannibal is satisfied there is nothing left.

Hannibal lets him go and Clayton's head drops. Hannibal feels him go limp, dead weight in his arms.

"Hannibal!"

Du Maurier notices the slump of Clayton's body. She looks to Hannibal, alarm growing every second.

"I know. He's not breathing. As expected. We have time. Where do you keep your manual resuscitator? Surely you have one if you intend to drug your dates. I doubt you want me to perform a tracheotomy."

Du Maurier does not answer but runs to the bathroom.

Hannibal turns Clayton over to lay face up the couch. Hannibal sees the completely dilated pupils, sees the spark of life in them ebbing away. He feels no movement in Clayton's chest, no breath stirs from his nose or lips.

Hannibal breathes into his mouth, going through the motions of resuscitation until Du Maurier can bring him the breathing bag and kit. He will have to pump air into Clayton's lungs manually until Clayton wakes up enough to resume normal breathing function. And he will need Du Maurier's help to do it. He cannot hold the tube down Clayton's throat and pump the bag at the same time.

Even if she called 911 paramedics would not arrive in time to save him. They are too far out for that. And then there would be questions.

Du Maurier gathers the kit she keeps beneath the vanity in the bathroom. One never knows when a guest might react unfavorably or overdose in your living room she thinks as she grabs a couple throw blankets from her bed. She wraps a blanket around herself and places the other over Clayton stretched out on the couch, feet on the floor, his head resting against the back.

Hannibal explains what he needs Du Maurier to do as he forces the tube through the vocal chords, down the trachea to the lungs. The trachea is tight. Hannibal can hardly pass the tube through. Had they waited much longer, he may not have been able to get the tube through at all. The tube will keep the trachea from collapsing when the air pumped from the bag passes in and out.

Du Maurier pumps the bag in timed intervals as Hannibal instructed. She does not think about what might happen. Hannibal is here. If Hannibal does not desire Clayton to die, he will not. If Hannibal ever intended to finish her he now had the means and opportunity to do so. He must not have her code or she would not be kneeling on the floor wrapped in a blanket pumping air into Clayton's chest.

Unless, Hannibal has developed an attachment to Clayton. She considers the possibility as she watches Hannibal attend to him.

Hannibal holds the breathing tube with steady hands. Clayton had automatically tried to reject it, but he is far too weakened to resist. The body responds to invaders, whether consciously or not. Hannibal gazes at the wet curls and the wet lashes as tears stream from eyes that respond to the harshness of the tube that rubs against the sensitive tissues lining esophagus and windpipe. He remembers another tube, another head of damp curls beneath his fingers.

He thinks Du Maurier will have a time concocting a believable story for this. A feat like that will require all of her powers of persuasion. Clayton is terribly uncomfortable right now and he will be terribly uncomfortable later. He looks at Hannibal through slits and Hannibal wonders what he sees behind his lids. At least his eyes are no longer rolled up in his head.

Hannibal has estimated that Clayton will require the tube for several more minutes. According to Du Maurier, the cocktail was small, only a few milligrams of the ingredients. He can only conclude that Clayton had an allergic reaction of some kind. Du Maurier had not given him enough to incapacitate him like this. He vomited plenty. The effects of the drugs in his system should abate soon.

Hannibal had come to the estate for insight and to satisfy his curiosity. He had desired insight into Du Maurier's intentions. He had wanted to observe Clayton with his dogs, engaged in the alternative therapy he promotes in his practice. He had watched Clayton and Du Maurier at their session with their patient. From a distance, he had looked very much like Will and Hannibal had felt the familiar ache from the open wound in his chest. He feels it now as he gazes at the unconscious Clayton, his very life in Hannibal's hands.

Hannibal will grant him his life. It is clear that Du Maurier thinks to play the swan with Clayton. She has involved Hannibal with Clayton, knowing his likeness to Will would charm him. Hannibal is now a patient of record. She has established a relationship that can be traced. That can only mean she intends to kill Clayton and frame Hannibal once she believes he has transferred the assets for Will. If she plans on clearing out their Swiss account, she would need to ensure Hannibal was in no position to follow her.

Her plan is exactly what Hannibal would do in her situation. Hannibal has often wondered how she managed to convince the FBI, convince Jack to let her go. She had manipulated immunity and Hannibal thinks perhaps she cut a deal with Uncle Jack. Jack had not been entirely comfortable placing his faith in Will. Jack might even have told himself he was protecting Will, but Hannibal suspects Jack's training and his agenda would have taken precedence. Jack had wanted Hannibal as much as, well, as much as Hannibal had wanted Will.

Jack has no idea what Du Maurier is. Du Maurier has hopes of manipulating Clayton somehow or else she would not resort to using drugs. The use of drugs also suggests she is impatient as the time for the transfer of funds draws near.

Clayton is also more than a lure for Hannibal. After seeing Du Maurier with him, it is obvious to Hannibal that he functions as the displaced target for all of Du Maurier's anger and resentment over Will. She has transferred her contempt for Will to Clayton. She demeans him. She takes control from him. She wishes to reduce him to nothing, as she wishes to do to Will. And she wishes for Hannibal to see it. She knew Hannibal was watching from the shadows. She was performing for him.

The minutes tick from the antique clock on the mantle. Du Maurier's legs are cramped but she dares not move before her task is complete. Clayton cannot die in her living room. She cannot believe this is happening to her. She rolls possible scenarios to present Clayton around in her mind, rejecting each one.

“Penny for your thoughts, Bedelia.”

“I didn't mean to hurt him, for this to happen.”

“I imagine not. The cocktail you prepared was designed to lower his inhibitions, make him more receptive to suggestion.”

“Yes.”

“You would use drugs to persuade him, why?”

“I suppose, that like you, I can become impatient for the insight I want from my…hobby.”

Du Maurier stares into Hannibal’s black eyes. He holds her gaze a moment then shifts his attentions to Clayton.

Clayton shakes his head side to side and begins to cough, a sign that he is becoming conscious. Conscious enough to want to push the tube from his throat to breathe on his own. The worst of it is over. Clayton will be feeling the effects of this cocktail for a while longer, but his body is functioning normally.

Hannibal holds Clayton’s jaws steady with one hand and slowly pulls the tube free. He lets Clayton cough and sputter, spitting phlegm but breathing. His chest rises as he quakes with the rush of oxygen, sucking in great tremulous gulps of air.

“How much damage will he feel when he wakes up?” Du Maurier asks.

“He is dehydrated. He will have an excruciating headache. He will feel pain every time he swallows. His throat is raw and I imagine there will be some bruising around his face and throat.”

“I suppose I should tell him something as close to the truth as possible.”

“An allergic reaction to something in the wine. He had the symptoms of anaphylactic shock. I suspect the GHB was the culprit.”

“How long do you estimate the effect of the GHB to last?”

“He is rid of most of it. The effects should wear off completely in a couple hours, perhaps less. He will begin to come around before then. He will be groggy, but he should be able to speak. That too will be painful.”

“Can we move him?”

“Soon. You want him in your bed?”

“I think that best. I can lie down with him.”

“Does he live alone? Is there anyone who will be concerned about him?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Then let him sleep it off, for as long as it takes. What about the dogs outside?’

“I can have one of the staff drive the dogs back to their kennel. And provide Clayton a ride home.”

Du Maurier watches Hannibal as he gazes at Clayton, wearing his peculiar mask of mild curiosity. He touches Clayton’s throat and glances at his watch.

“His heart rate is climbing quickly, almost normal.” Hannibal says after a moment.

“You do like him, don’t you? I knew you would.”

“I enjoy his company. I am pleased I will be seeing him for my appointment this week.”

Clayton is a beautiful wreck. Hannibal does not let his eyes wander far from him as he sits beside him, watching him tremble with every breath beneath the blanket. His attachment to the young doctor is clear enough. The possessiveness is another matter.

“About those boundaries, Hannibal. While I am most grateful that you were here, you understand each of us is entitled to some assurance of privacy.”

“Where he is concerned, I think boundaries do not apply. You cannot offer me a gift and then presume to tell me how I may enjoy it.”

“Hannibal. This is my home while I am in Fiesole. You have come to my home in Siena and now here. I do not come unannounced to your home.”

“And that is entirely up to you.” Hannibal says with a knowing smile.

Hannibal looks over at Clayton. He still breathes through his mouth, but the breaths are full and regular. Clayton is stable enough to move, and to leave in Du Maurier’s questionable care. Hannibal traces a finger over his eyebrows to smooth the furrow there, a habit he had taken to with Will.

Hannibal turns his thoughts to the twins sitting in the guest room in the depths of his villa. They have no doubt passed the limit of holding their bowels by now. He will have to hose them down, again. He thinks he should probably feed them, too.

“I will move him into the bedroom now and then I have to go. You will be busy cleaning up for a while, I’m afraid.”

“Thank you, Hannibal.” Du Maurier manages through tight lips.

Du Maurier clicks her fingernails against the wood of the couch. She will need to find Clayton’s phone if only to keep an eye on it. She can’t send a message home that he is staying the night. She isn’t supposed to know he lives with anyone.

Hannibal gathers Clayton up and hoists him down the hall, allowing his feet to drag behind him. Clayton is heavier than he looks. Hannibal lifts him onto Du Maurier’s bed, rolls him to his side in a classic recovery position, arms and legs crossed to stabilize him with chin up so he doesn’t choke on any drool or residual phlegm from his ordeal.

Hannibal is intrigued by Clayton’s behavior with Du Maurier before he collapsed. While it is not impossible for partners to climax at the same time, he imagines the type of pairing between Du Maurier and Clayton would likely not result in what he witnessed. Will could do that with his imagination. Clayton seemed to be empathizing with Du Maurier. Perhaps even involuntarily due to the drugs.

Hannibal has never told Du Maurier the specifics of Will’s mind. She only knows Will is able to assume other points of view, even those of serial killers. Hannibal thinks it unlikely she would attribute the same gift to Clayton, if it is even the same gift. It has been a long time since Hannibal has looked forward to a therapy session.

Du Maurier believes it was fortunate Hannibal was here. Hannibal thinks it fate. It was not yet time for Clayton to die. Hannibal thinks it is not Du Maurier's fate to take his life either. He leans over and draws his thumb across Clayton's brow before he leaves. This young doctor is a little more than light and air and color.

Du Maurier has pulled on her wilted dress and poured herself a glass of wine by the time Hannibal returns to the living room. Seeing Du Maurier out of her usual element is strangely disconcerting. She has placed paper towels next to the soiled rug and stands eyeing the pool of vomit on her carpet. Hannibal knows how she feels. No matter how much she cleans, the smell will never go away. She will have to replace the rug.

"No need to show me out, Bedelia. Good night."

Du Maurier watches him walk out her front door into the twilight his head up and gait purposeful, probably the same way he walked in. She finishes her glass of wine, savors the metallic finish and feels the alcohol's numbing effects on the anxiety thumping at the back of her skull. She has to tidy up and she welcomes the tedious mindlessness of the tasks at hand. As she kneels over her ruined rug scooping up the vomit into a bucket with thick gloves she thinks about the shape of the lie she must tell Clayton.

As she climbs into bed with Clayton it occurs to her that he must have told Graham where he was going. If Graham does not hear from Clayton by morning, he may become concerned enough to look for him. She glances at Clayton lying beside her, facing her in the shadows. She nudges him gently to see if he is conscious enough to respond. He shifts his weight and groans. Encouraged, she nudges him again.

"Daniel?" She strokes his cheek. "Daniel?"

Daniel's limbs feel heavy as he shifts around, every movement exaggerated, lethargic. Someone is speaking to him but sounds are muffled. He imagines the voice coming from a jar he can't open. He tries to lick his parched lips but there is no moisture upon his tongue to coat them. His throat feels bone dry and he struggles to swallow.

"Daniel…can you hear me?"

Du Maurier ruffles the damp curls, brushes them off his forehead.

"Hummmmm. It…hurts…"

He can barely get out a whisper. He shifts again, eyelids flickering open.

"Do you know where you are?"

He does not recognize the person in the shadows. He thinks he is dreaming. He closes his eyes, feels himself drifting…

"Daniel, where are you?"

"Home?" Daniel thinks where else would he be.

“Where is Will?”

“Hummmm?”

He swallows; winces and swallows again. His tongue clicks against the roof of his mouth. Du Maurier knows she should get some fluids in him, but she’s not sure he can sit up just yet or if he would keep anything down. She decides to wait.

“Where is Will?”

Du Maurier watches Clayton reach around behind him to feel along the mattress. He frowns and edges closer to Du Maurier.

“I don’t know.” He mumbles, his voice small, cracked.

“Does he know where you are?”

Daniel thinks a moment as the voice blooms in his mind, almost familiar. Will is with Alia, he doesn’t care where Daniel is…

Clayton sighs into the pillow, “He had a…date.”

Graham had a date? Du Maurier runs her fingers through the damp mess of curls as she collects her thoughts. Clayton is dreaming. His responses are not reliable, though they are spontaneous. She watches Clayton retreat into his slumber unaware he almost died this evening.

Alia lies in Will’s arms stretched out beside him on the couch. They lay beneath a blanket, a coarse throw blanket Will had pulled from one of the chairs. It is a little too warm and itchy, but just lying there on the couch nude with him had seemed…immodest. His eyes are closed but she knows he is not asleep though he has been quiet for several minutes. She stares up at the ceiling and watches the fan spin lazily as she drifts into thoughts of the lovemaking she enjoyed with Will.

She often has fantasies of what sex will be like with the men she dates before they actually get into bed with her. Sometimes there isn’t even a date. She is usually disappointed. She always reminds herself afterward that her expectations are unreasonable, tells herself that she perhaps did something wrong or she wasn’t what he had expected.

She finds it ironic and frustrating that she does not second guess herself on the job, but she always does in the bedroom. Then again, she argues on the job, fights…but in bed she thinks she must behave like her mother.

She turns her head and smiles at Will. This time was not a disappointment. He had been hesitant at first; taking his time almost like he had been testing her responses. When he had gazed into her eyes Alia had been moved by those eyes, so wounded and so compassionate at the same time. Whatever he had seen in her eyes had found its way into his lovemaking. He had made her fantasies about him real.

“You imagined what I wanted, didn’t you?” Alia lifts a finger to tickle the whiskers across his lip.

“Um…yes. That isn’t surprising from what you know about me, is it?”

“Uh-uh…” she shakes her head and plucks at his lips until he smiles, “So what did you imagine? What did you see?”

Will’s smile grows wider. “Were you…happy about it?”

Alia’s eyes grow wide, bright and teasing. She kicks him in the shin. Will runs his fingers through her hair enjoying the feel of the silky strands as they slide back to hang about her face.

“Then, does it matter?” Will says.

“I want to know…”

“…how I knew you liked…horseback riding?”

Will senses the movement of her arm and ducks his head, unsuccessfully as Alia actually slaps his ears. Will is still not used to her very physical way of communicating but he finds himself liking it. He likes her rough teasing and he had especially liked the way she had rocked her body on top of him.

“You…make a very good pony.” Alia says puckering her lips.

Will kisses her lips, “A pony? All I get is…pony?”

“Ponies are cute…I like ponies.”

“You…are still drunk.” Will says half laughing. He wipes at his eyes. She makes him laugh too easily it seems.

“And you…have really pretty eyes. I love your eyes.”

Will laughs some more, always uncomfortable with compliments. He shrugs it off, kisses her again.

“You’re supposed to say thank you. And then say something nice to me.”

Will raises his brows at being schooled. “Oh…I uh…who told you that?”

“My mother. Didn’t your mother teach you proper manners?”

Will’s eyes grow distant for a second but then he smiles and places a finger to her nose. Alia’s fingers find his lips again, tracing circles around and around the stubble.

“I like how you don’t wear any make-up. You are stunning without it.”

Will grins as she snuggles closer, his answer clearly acceptable. She yawns into his chest. Will knows she is still a little drunk. Between the wine and the sex, she is a few minutes away from falling asleep on him.

Alia still feels a little tipsy, but more than that she feels contented. She wants the afternoon with Will to last. Will still reminds her of the ostracized saint, uncomfortable with his gift. Blessed with understanding and compassion, he understands people so well yet finds it difficult to walk among them.

It is because of his gift he carries so many wounds and he believes it is his burden to carry them alone. Alia doesn't want the saint; she wants the man. She saw the man this afternoon. He let her see.

When Will had removed his shirt she had reached out her hand immediately, to touch the scar across his stomach. He had flinched but allowed her to trace her fingers over it, eyes averted while she had leaned down to kiss him there. He had lain still, silent and eyes glistening as he had watched her slowly kiss her way up to his face, to meet his sad blue eyes.

It still hurts you, doesn't it?

He had nodded slowly at her and then had guided her hand back to it and held it tightly in place.

It hurts a little less now…

She pushes thoughts of returning to work tomorrow out of her head. She wants today.

"When do you think Daniel will be back?"

"No idea. Tired?"

"I am a little sleepy."

"Go to sleep then. I'll keep an eye out for Daniel."

Alia considers Will might fall asleep, too. She thinks Daniel won't mind finding them on the couch. In fact, she thinks she likes the idea of him finding them on the couch together, like this.

"Ok. You watch. I'll sleep."

Will kisses her forehead and watches her settle, perfectly at ease resting on his arm. He thinks he should move his arm from beneath her, but it feels good to hold her like this. Will doubts they will be doing it again. His life has a way of getting in the way of things like this…

The sound of Alia breathing next to him fades to stillness. The smell of acrid smoke fills his nostrils and Will becomes aware of the brush of fur at his fingertips.

He sits alongside the grey wolf, perched upon a cracked aged boulder, gazing at the ruined landscape he is all too familiar with. He looks tiredly to his other side to find the creature he already knows is there, resting next to him. He feels the feathers brush lightly across his face as the serpent tailed eagle ruffles its huge wings. It turns its head to look at him, large red rimmed eyes so close Will can see himself reflected in the black irises.

The wolf growls, a low rumbling deep in its throat. A warning growl.

What are we waiting for? Will asks because it is obvious they are waiting for something.

What are you waiting for? Hannibal's voice whispers in his ears.

I'm not…waiting for anything.

Why do you think you are here, Will?

In my inferno? You tell me.

Deception has become so easy for you; you do not even realize when you deceive yourself.

Deception requires knowing truth from lie. What truth would I be hiding from?

What truth would you be hiding in a lie?

> *Hannibal thinks you are his man in the room. I think you're mine.*

Will sighs as the feathers skim across his cheek gently caressing. He feels the thing inside stirring and he swallows preparing for the knot it always seems to cause.

Do you remember the circles of hell, Will?

> *I was euphoric when I killed Freddie Lounds.*

Most of them, why?

Consider the ninth circle as you contemplate your…present situation.

Will feels his bones pop along his spine, vertebrae splitting apart as the sensation of pressure builds along his back. Will twists upon the rock arching backward as his hands fumble under his jacket and shirt searching along his skin. He is sure he is splitting open.

The wolf whines and snarls at his side, but does not leave. It sits waiting, its eyes shifting from the eagle to Will and to the pile of smoldering bramble and ghosts of trees in the distance.

Will feels along his shoulders and stretches to find raised welts at his shoulder blades, he presses harder into his own flesh and feels what seems to be knotted bone just beneath the skin. The things stirs again below, tugging at his organs and Will cringes as his skins breaks open between his shoulders. He can feel sharp points emerging, one over each shoulder blade.

The ninth circle was sin against God. Will hisses between clenched teeth.

Very good. What kind of sin?

Agh…What kind of God?

Will stops reaching behind his back and swings his arms around front to rest in his lap. Will looks at the blood on hands.

The wolf stands up suddenly; tufted ears alert and listening, mouth open in anticipation. The serpent tailed eagle sits erect, placing a wing over Will's shoulder, its eyes focused on the smoldering thicket of bramble.

See? Hannibal whispers… *Do you see, Will*?

Will looks. He sees the viper. Its scaly body trails blood behind it as it slips again into the thicket and disappears. The great wings ripple over his shoulder and the pain seems to abate a little with each caress of soft black feathers.

We are both alone without each other.

“Will?

Will clutches at the blanket, flexes his back against the cushions of the couch.

“Will?”

He opens his eyes. Alia stands over him, fully dressed and keys in hand.

“It’s like nine o’clock. We took a long nap.”

Will sits up, rubs at his eyes.

“You have to go?”

“Yeah, I got work early tomorrow. Sundays always suck.”

“You ok to drive?”

“Yeah. I feel good.” She leans over and lifts Will’s chin up with a finger, “I feel really good. See you soon?”

Will nods and she kisses him, not too quickly and turns to walk out the door. She pets each of the dogs before she opens the door.

“You uh…might want to take them out. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Will waves from the couch. The dogs amble over wagging their tails looking hopeful. Will checks his phone. No calls or messages from Daniel. He looks at the dogs and motions for them to come close. He rubs at their ears.

“Guess I’ll be taking you out tonight, huh?”

His clothes are on the floor where he left them. Will pulls them on while the dogs pace at the door eager to walk. Will can’t imagine where Daniel could be this late. He couldn’t still be at the estate, could he?

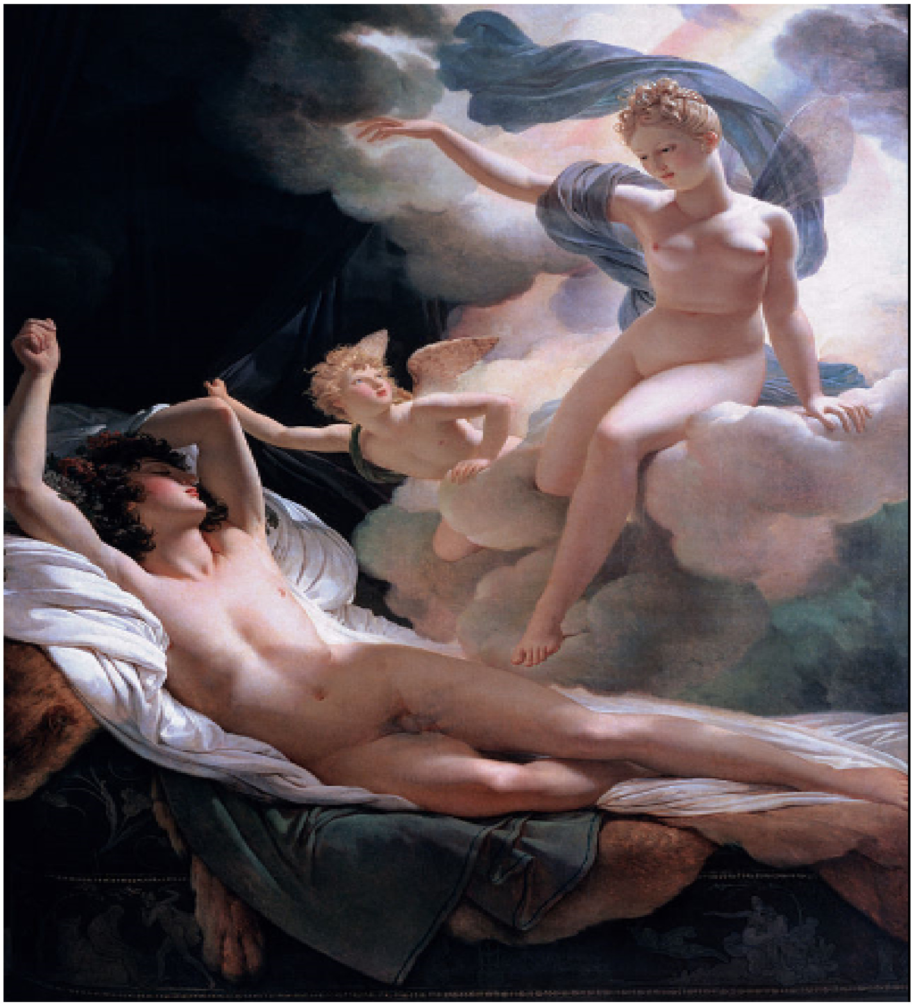
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

> Daniel awakens from his ordeal and soon learns it is not over. Du Maurier plants another snare for Hannibal. Will visits his inferno and things get more twisted.
>
> “It sounds like he’s blocking. And you thought that I could offer him something you couldn’t?”
>
> “Yes, first let me ask you something. What did he tell you were his reasons for seeking therapy?”
>
> “Grief.”
>
> “And for whom is he grieving?”
>
> “He said he lost a daughter.”
>
> Du Maurier sits back in her chair, plays with her cup allowing the long pause to build for emphasis.
>
> “It took me six months of therapy with him to realize there is no daughter.”
>
> “What?”

Chapter 50

Daniel awakens from his ordeal and soon learns it is not over. Du Maurier plants another snare for Hannibal. Will visits his inferno and things get more twisted.



Morpheus and Iris , by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin ,

Sleep had a thousand sons, and of that number

He made the choice of waking Morpheus.

He was an actor; no one had more skill

At walking like a man, at looking like one,

At dressing like a man in all his fashions.

Ovid Book XI – Sleep

Du Maurier watches Clayton sleep a few more moments before waking him. She admires the fruit of her labors as he lay in all his splendor wrapped in pink and perfumed satin looking very much as Graham must have looked to Hannibal. She cannot help but smile at this. Graham may be Hannibal's Achilles' heel, but he is beautiful, and his beleaguered likeness rests resplendently upon *her* bed.

She has not slept, but for one or two cat naps. She had spent the remainder of the evening and most of the night ensuring that Clayton would awaken with few or none of the side effects of his ordeal.

Keeping him hydrated, warm, and as pain free as possible had been an easy enough task. Clayton had been as docile as a lamb following her instructions while exhibiting the trust of a child. Caring for a person physically was not within her usual field of expertise, but she had managed. He had required cleaning up after the sex, after the vomiting, and after administering drug soaked suppositories because he could not swallow the Vicodin caplets without sputtering and spitting and very nearly choking for the first several hours. She had not wanted to risk him choking on anything.

He should awaken responsive and clear eyed with only the usual suspects that accompany a hangover. Du Maurier thinks she will take a very long nap after he leaves, which she decides should be soon as she listens to the vibrating of his phone on the nightstand. She assumes it is Graham. The number is not local and id reads simply Will. Du Maurier did not check the texts. She can guess what Graham would be inquiring about. Better that Clayton open the messages himself.

This is the third time he has contacted Clayton and with the hour coming up on eight on a Sunday morning, she thinks it is time to wake Clayton up. He will likely sleep some more when he returns home, but he can't remain here any longer. Time to find out if her efforts have been successful.

She brushes his hair off his forehead, and runs her fingers through the tangles as he slowly opens his eyes to look up at her. He blinks several times to focus, clicks his tongue and swallows… without too much wincing. Du Maurier takes that as a good omen.

"Good morning…Daniel."

She smiles at him and almost laughs at the surprised expression on his face as he looks around momentarily at a loss. The bewildered look in his eyes is accompanied by an awkward shifting of his limbs as he turns to his side to face her, hands grasping at the sheet to cover himself. Du Maurier had left the sheets drawn barely to his thighs concealing nothing, a small indulgence for her this morning.

The bed had smelled different and felt different to Daniel before he even opened his eyes. He blinks as his vision adjusts to the glare of sun between the slats of the wood blinds; his head throbs a little with the light. Cara is not at his feet and these are not his sheets. They are satin and they are…pink?

And they are gathered around his legs. He pulls up the sheets, aware of Dumont's lingering gaze.

He stares into Dumont's face. She holds a dainty porcelain cup and saucer in her hand. He starts up from the mattress but the sour taste in his mouth and the drumming in his head stops him cold and he drops flat onto the pillow again.

Dumont looks very tired and there are dark circles under her eyes. She wears a thin cotton robe and she looks quite different from last night. She has combed her hair, but she wears no make-up. Her skin is flawless, and in the morning light without the smoothing patina of foundation, the lines and wrinkles of age crease at her eyes and mouth. He decides the lack of make-up doesn't render her less beautiful rather she seems more real to him. Less…artificial.

There is a weariness about her that settles in with Daniel's own raw fatigue. He can relate to that. She reaches out a hand to touch his forehead, brush her fingers through his hair. She wears a kind but concerned smile as she balances her cup of…tea he notices by the pristine white tag hanging over the side of the dainty porcelain cup.

“How are you feeling?” Dumont says, still smiling.

The lump in Daniel’s throat feels like a scratchy tennis ball going down, and almost as large. He swallows a couple times before he speaks; his tongue sticky and rough as sandpaper.

“Agh, I feel like a hundred miles of bad road, really…bad road.” He breathes into the pillow, detects the scent of vomit, probably his own. He can taste it if he really thinks about it.

“We had quite a night. I apologize for letting you drink so much wine…”

“So much wine?”

“I’m thinking that is what made you sick. One minute you were fine, the next you were doubled over. You don’t remember?”

“I got sick. Where?”

“You vomited all over the rug in the living room. I was sick, but later whilst cleaning up. Not the way we planned on spending the evening was it?”

“Jesus Fu…” Daniel rubs at his mouth, “I must have blacked out. I don’t remember…”

“You passed out eventually, but you vomited first. Do you remember being on the couch?”

Du Maurier raises her brows. All during the night Du Maurier had whispered the phrases of her intended fiction like a mantra into Clayton’s ear as she had held him close to her, stroking, touching, repeating. Clayton’s mind should embellish the narrative she offered with images he will believe actually happened.

Du Maurier is confident Clayton has succumbed to her drug induced suggestions. She learned from the best.

Daniel remembers his face between Dumont’s smooth legs, his mouth sucking on her clit and a flush runs up his neck at the other images that roll around his head.

“Uh yeah…” he says quietly looking into Dumont’s tired blue eyes, “Up to a point. How could I black out after only one glass?”

Du Maurier shakes her head and draws her fingers across his brow. “You had more than one glass, but it seemed an allergic reaction. The wine is from a case of an old reserve vintage that has a higher alcohol content than usual. The corks are moldy, sometimes that can indicate a higher histamine and bacteria count. I’m only guessing. You broke out in hives and had difficulty breathing. It was pretty frightening actually.”

Daniel thinks he remembers drinking on the couch, the glass slipping from his fingers, Dumont’s fingers in his mouth…

“Sounds like anaphylactic shock. But I have no allergies.”

“That you are aware of.”

Daniel feels itchy. He wants to scrape his nails all over his skin. He remembers feeling unusually warm and feverish last evening. He can’t stop swallowing and clicking his tongue. He would like to scrape the coating of paste off it and thinks he should at least get into the bathroom and gargle with some mouthwash.

“I guess drinking the first glass down had something to do with it.”

“I would tend to agree. We both drank way too much I’m afraid. I am appalled at myself.”

“That makes two of us. Don’t give it a second…Oh god, the dogs…”

“They are fine. I called the house to have someone drive them back to kennel last night. You asked about them several times. But your phone has been vibrating off and on all morning.”

“Oh shit…I should call home…”

Daniel looks to the nightstand on his side of the bed and grabs the phone. He checks the messages, sees that the last three are from Will. He laughs aloud as he reads:

10:31 pm - WTF R U?

3:17 am - sum house call

7:42 am - where is the dog food?

Quite unmindful of Dumont perched at the edge of the bed with her tea, he calls Will, thoughts of the anxiety he probably caused foremost on his mind. Hopefully, Will had not passed the night tossing and turning with nightmares. Daniel’s absence had obviously worried him, despite the lightheartedness of the messages, and his absence should have alarmed Will. Will knows Daniel would not leave his dogs unattended for so long without an explanation. Daniel would not have left Will alone, either, but he doesn’t expect Will to acknowledge that.

There is comfort in the knowledge that Will does worry about him. Will *feels* a lot, too much, but he often doesn’t *show* his feelings.

“Hey” He breathes, trying not to groan into the phone.

“Hey yourself. It’s about time you picked up. Still at the estate?”

Daniel feels the relief in Will’s voice immediately like he just let the air out of a balloon.

“Yeah…had a rough night, decided to sleep in.”

Will can picture Daniel in his head as he speaks. His husky voice conjures images of him reclining, eyes closed and mouth twisted into a guilty smile as he stretches himself along a mattress in a dim room, shades still down and curtains drawn. Will thinks it must have been a rough night indeed for Daniel not to phone. Daniel is thoughtful to a fault, sometimes Will thinks to his own detriment.

“Uh huh. Sleeping in with your colleague?”

Another pair of feet materializes next to Daniel’s in the bed Will has created in his imagination.

“Well, certainly not with the patient.”

Daniel grins at the soft chuckle from the other end.

"I'll be out of here soon…" Daniel looks to Dumont, "I'll get a ride home."

Dumont nods, still smiling imagining the two of them together…in bed. She notes the way Clayton's entire being brightens as he talks into his phone, shifting and stretching, his lips tug to one side as he listens to whatever Graham is saying his fingers idly stroking at his stomach.

"And I was looking forward to taking the Mercedes out for a spin."

"If you couldn't find the dog food, I doubt you'd find the keys…"

"The ones on top of the fridge?"

Daniel sighs. It is good to hear Will's voice, and to hear that he seems in a good mood. "So, how was your evening?"

"Uh…Alia left around nine. Had work this morning."

Daniel thinks that means they had themselves a pleasant tumble but she couldn't stay the night. Daniel wonders fleetingly where they ended up and pictures the couch. Will would not have taken her upstairs. Daniel thinks it an odd coincidence he also spent a lot of his evening on a couch.

Couches, patients, and psychiatrists…Daniel shakes his head.

"Oh, she did, huh?" Daniel says.

"Look, glad you called. I'll see you when I see you."

"Okay."

Daniel clicks off the phone, still smiling. He looks over at Dumont who raises her brows at him.

"I thought you lived alone. You gave that impression."

"I do…usually. Temporary roommate in transition. Just helping him out."

"Sounds friendly."

Daniel nods and looks up at Dumont who sets her cup and saucer on the night stand next to his phone and stretches out next to him. She traces her fingers around his face and does not have to wonder what he is thinking behind the veil of green. She tugs at the sheet so it falls from his shoulders and she presses a finger into the bruise along his collarbone.

"Ouch…" Daniel half laughs and grabs her hand; gently pulls it away from the sensitive flesh and tender bone, memories of struggling against Will's sturdy body and relentless mouth tortuously sweet.

"I noticed you like getting physical." Du Maurier's other hand slips beneath the sheet and Daniel feels warm fingers pass over his lower abdomen, trailing lower still. "Did your roommate give you these?"

His mouth drops open at the question and he starts at the grasp of her fingers around his cock. His mind explodes at the sensation and he pushes the unbidden memories of Will down. He shimmies away from her in the bed. He can't easily wriggle out of this one, however. Dumont's eyes stare into his intently awaiting a response.

"He did." Daniel says with a teasing lilt to his voice and raise of his brows. He can torment her with this morsel. And only this morsel.

"Hmmmm. So, sexually, you're…"

"Adventurous." Daniel finishes for her. "Intrigued?"

"Warmed by the very thought." Dumont smiles.

"And you?" Daniel asks.

"Me…what?"

"Adventurous, too?"

"Yes…actually." Du Maurier thinks *touché*. She sends Clayton another volley. "Does he let you… bite him back?"

Daniel pushes her onto the mattress so she lays flat, hair tumbling from silky pale shoulders as her breasts tumble out of her robe. Daniel kisses down her breastbone, feels the swell of soft flesh as her breasts rise to flush warm beneath his lips.

"You have an awful lot of questions for so early in the morning."

"Well, I couldn't ask you last night."

Daniel looks up at her, "For all I know, you asked me all sorts of things last night" He eyes her carefully, sensing a little agitation from her.

"Well, I tried…" She touches the stubble around his chin and lips, "Speaking of last night, next time…this has to go. I am positively raw this morning."

"Oh? Oh." Daniel smiles awkwardly. "A little too bristly huh? It would probably feel better if I let it grow…"

"No. I'd like it smooth. Up here…and…down there." Daniel feels her hands slip down his body and slide across his stomach to caress his navel and pluck the hairs lower.

"Oh no… I don't think so." Daniel says lifting up from the touch of probing fingers.

Du Maurier raises her hips off the bed so she can grind against Daniel. "Ever let anyone shave you?"

Clayton blushes deep pink immediately and pushes off the mattress, arms on either side of Du Maurier, head angled to one side as he looks down at her. Du Maurier wonders how adventurous he is, or could be with her. With the time he has left…

"My face, yes. Not pulling any punches this morning, are you?" Daniel says, annoyed she caught him off guard like that.

“There’s something dangerously intimate in allowing another to hold a blade to your…throat, isn’t there?”

Daniel lets thoughts of a blade anywhere else slip away. He is not even going to touch that with Dumont who is clearly aroused by the idea. Her body is fairly pulsing with excitement though on the surface she remains cool and aloof, her tone strangely detached, as though she were talking to a patient.

“Especially if the other person is shit faced.” He grins at Dumont. “It does require a certain trust and steady hands.”

“That…could be arranged. I’m wondering how you would look, you have incredible bone structure.”

“Thanks.” Daniel says, hoping she is referring to his face. “I look younger, that’s how I look. I seem young enough to my patients as it is…”

“Hmm. You are quite distracting for Lydia. She giggled like a school girl with you.”

Daniel thinks Lydia is not the only one distracted, but adds, “Lydia is a school girl, at least emotionally. She’ll get over the infatuation. I won’t be around that long for her to get too attached. She’s supposed to bond with the dog; not me.”

Du Maurier brushes her knuckles along his jaw, remembering how he had looked in repose, lips parted in slumber upon her pillows.

“Concerned your roommate might not like it?” Du Maurier teases.

She is increasingly curious about the relationship Clayton seems intent on keeping from her. She can’t decide if his reluctance to talk about Graham is possessiveness or protectiveness. If Graham actually had a date, and it sounded like he had, perhaps Clayton is simply protecting his privacy, and Graham’s, though Clayton has no idea she already knows his identity. She reminds herself it is Clayton’s nature to be polite and diplomatic.

“Cesca… Let’s leave a little mystery between us, huh?”

“Too soon to discuss personal relationships? Only patients?”

Daniel’s eyes flicker with alarm until he reminds himself she couldn’t possibly know about Will.

“Just certain patients. The one we share and the one you referred to me.”

Du Maurier raises her brows. “Ah, Victor, well…Doctor Boucher.”

“It’s ok…he told me to call him Victor, too. I have a couple questions about him, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course…” Du Maurier is surprised it took Clayton this long to inquire about Hannibal. Then again, Clayton does seem to shuffle thoughts around his head arranging them like furniture until they settle exactly where he wants them to. He has probably been arranging his thoughts about Hannibal quite a lot.

Daniel sits up, ignoring the drum rolls in his head and the twinge of vertigo from moving too quickly against gravity. Images of his dogs and the comfort of his own bed fill his mind. He suddenly wants to be transported home more than anything. He glances at Dumont lying expectantly beside him. He thinks she likely doesn't appreciate how hung over he still is. He dismisses her apparent lack of sympathy, already acquainted with her consuming sense of self.

The feeling that she wants something from him persists. The anticipation seeps into the surface of her skin, absorbing form and color like a tattoo, and the feeling that he has yet to deliver on something raps at his skull as Daniel tries to imagine what that could be. Her appreciative glances are beginning to wear on him and Daniel is not in the mood for her coyness. He has had his fill of Dumont for the moment, for the week.

He is more than a little upset with himself for behaving like a college student on spring break last night. He thinks maybe there might have been a residual sexual tension from Will influencing his emotions, fueled by the alcohol and his own desire to really push Dumont's buttons. He sucks in his lower lip as he thinks his buttons are the ones getting pushed, and quite effectively.

He would very much like to alter the trajectory of the conversation and her gaze away from him. Any insight she can offer into the enigmatic Victor would be appreciated. The next session will be the full hour and Daniel has yet to prepare for it.

"I should get dressed. I'm going to use the bathroom." He leans to brush his lips across her cheek. "We can talk in a minute?"

He slides legs off the bed that feel heavy and ungainly. His entire body feels sore. He rubs at his jaw, it feels tender to the touch and Daniel can almost hear the crack of knuckles as strong fingers pry his jaws open. Snatches of odd dreams and sensations sift around and blow through his mind in a sandstorm that refuses to settle. He thinks they must have fucked pretty hard on that couch…

"I'll get you some tea. Or would you prefer coffee?"

"No…tea sounds good. Cream and sugar…English style." Daniel enjoys the bright smile his request brings to Dumont's face.

"Darjeeling?"

"Perfect."

Daniel stands at the vanity and looks at himself in the mirror. He doesn't look as bad as feels, though he has had occasion to feel much worse than he does this morning. His memory of last evening is muddled and, like that first drunken chat with Will in his office, he doubts he will ever remember it to his satisfaction.

He rummages through the vanity cabinet and the medicine cabinet until he finds the toiletries he wants. First order of business he decides, wash out his mouth.

Du Maurier begins to make the bed up once Clayton has shut the door to the bathroom. She will change the sheets later, no need to make a show of stripping the bed while he's still here. She imagines Clayton staring at himself in the mirror, silently reprimanding himself for his assumed behavior last evening. Better to let him scold himself than to know what actually happened.

Graham is clearly working through his issues with Hannibal, and becoming very intimate with his psychiatrist to do so. The level of intimacy he seems to share with Clayton suggests their relationship goes beyond the physical. Physical intimacy is often easier to achieve than the emotional variety. There is much less risk. Clayton has earned Graham's trust, a remarkable feat given what Graham has been through.

Du Maurier thinks of Clayton's relaxed manner as he had talked on the phone, unconsciously touching himself and smiling at words she could not hear. Clayton's affection for his broken patient was written all over his face. She thinks of the exchange she had witnessed on Clayton's patio and finds it hard to reconcile the melancholy Graham she knew with the animated one Clayton seems to have engendered. Clayton has certainly put a little zest into Graham's existence. He has perhaps been an effective distraction from Graham's obsessive pursuit of Hannibal. She would not doubt it.

Hannibal would not be pleased to know that another vies for Graham's attentions. Graham exists for Hannibal and only Hannibal.

As Graham's psychiatrist, Clayton is meeting his professional obligations with his patient. But the relationship with Graham must mean much more to Clayton. Du Maurier does not think Clayton would compromise his reputation or his integrity easily. Clayton has likely found Graham as compelling as everyone else who crosses the problematic profiler's path. The difference is that Graham must find Clayton equally as compelling.

What will Hannibal think about that? The sauce for the goose thickens. Du Maurier thinks she should share some insight into Clayton's new patient. Hannibal has plenty of advantages over Clayton. A little insight into his new patient would go a long ways. Clayton has already demonstrated an impressive grasp of the human psyche. She is curious how much of Hannibal he can grasp.

She needs to introduce Hannibal's pathology to him gradually, a spoonful at a time. If Clayton can be guided to make the right associations, he will tell Graham. Once associations click for Graham, he will not wait to confront Hannibal. He will not want to do anything but confront Hannibal should all go as expected.

She opens the blinds in her bedroom and walks to the other end of the guest house where the kitchen and living room are situated, no wall separating them. She hears Clayton coming; his footfalls pause in the living room. She watches him examine the carpet by the couch and wrinkle his nose. By the time Clayton joins her at the sunny corner table his tea already sits piping hot in front of him. She notes he has made do admirably with what he found in her bathroom to freshen up.

His deep green eyes hold her in their gaze beneath thick arched brows that frame a beguiling canvas of soft skin and the whisper of whiskers around a sensual mouth. He is disarmingly attractive for having almost died last night.

He eases into the chair, shirt buttoned and shoes laced with one foot toward the door already.

"I called up to the house. They have a driver for you."

"Thanks. Don't want to wear out my welcome."

He smiles, knowing Dumont would keep him in her bed all day if she could. He feels badly about the carpet. He really did a number on it. The rug is ruined. He blows across the lip of the cup in its pretty little saucer as he summons his thoughts on Victor.

“About your referral…”

“How did you find him?”

“A little imposing intellectually, and remarkably self-contained, but agreeable and really charming. I like him.”

“He is charming. I like him, too.” Du Maurier thinks that was the truth, until recently.

“You should have given me a heads up. I was incredibly unprepared for him that morning.”

Daniel remembers the morning well. He had forgotten to set his alarm, distracted by the novelty of having Will at his house, and in his bed. He had been distracted by Will’s blackouts and his emotional turmoil fresh from the trauma of returning from their trip to find his residence at the palazzo still smoldering.

And that awful conference call with Chilton the day before had not helped either. The amount of stress Will juggles day in and day out boggles Daniel’s mind. He wonders how Will keeps it together. Of course, Will is not keeping it together, not really. He is just very good at hiding how fractured he is, beautiful tortured mess that he is.

Daniel considers that Will’s mind is always adjusting to the constant sensual and emotional overload. Will exists in a reality without closure. A reality where one event topples over another in an endless cycle bereft of resolution. He prioritizes, manages expectations, on autopilot. He had had a really awful night the night before Victor’s appointment.

The morning of Victor’s appointment had found Daniel running late and running on three hours of sleep and half a pot of coffee.

Dumont is tapping her foot lightly against the leg of the table. Daniel looks up from his cup and draws a breath. They were talking about Victor.

“You were saying?” he says.

Du Maurier sighs, her patience a little thin. She suffers Hannibal’s lapses into his memory palace, endures the daydreaming while he sits across from her at the dinner table, or walks beside her down a street. She doesn’t have to indulge Clayton’s daydreaming. It is especially exasperating to know who each of them daydreams about. So infuriating…Graham.

“That I apologize.” She says quietly, “Victor presents with some delicate issues. He requires a compassionate but firm therapist. I had thought I had time to talk to you about him, not realizing he would contact you as quickly he did. I did write the referral but I also told him that I would talk to you first.”

“You couldn’t pick up a phone? And I guess you couldn’t write much, knowing he would read it.”

“No…what did he say?”

“That your association… was no longer *efficacious*, he said, with regard to your uh, therapy and your availability. That sounds like a dismissal to me.”

“It was, but it was a mutual decision. I can no longer provide him what with he needs.”

“What would that be?”

“I do not know. I only know that I do not appear to have whatever it is he wants from therapy. He has been dissatisfied with our arrangement for some time.”

“No…um…progress?”

He takes a gulp of the tea. It’s perfect, just the way he takes it. His stomach grumbles but doesn’t reject the warm and soothing beverage.

“There has been some progress. But, I sense a certain…dissatisfaction from him and I think I may have reached my professional limit. I feel like I drive the same roads over and over with him and I am sure it feels to him as though we are no further along than last week, or the week before… We seem to be stuck in the proverbial ditch. I am at a loss, frankly.”

Daniel gets the feeling that being at a loss is not something Dumont experiences often. Perhaps Victor frustrates her, causes her to doubt herself. Referring him is classic avoidance. Perhaps.

“It sounds like he’s blocking. And you thought that I could offer him something you couldn’t?”

“Yes, first let me ask you something. What did he tell you were his reasons for seeking therapy?”

“Grief.”

“And for whom is he grieving?”

“He said he lost a daughter.”

Du Maurier sits back in her chair, plays with her cup allowing the long pause to build for emphasis.

“It took me six months of therapy with him to realize there is no daughter.”

“What?”

Daniel is completely shocked. He instantly begins to reassess the session with Victor. Victor had been vague, but Daniel had not sensed anything like deceit of that magnitude, unless Victor actually believes he lost a daughter which presents an entirely different set of issues.

Daniel had felt a mix of emotions from his patient that day, had thought perhaps there were other losses in addition to the daughter, but he had not imagined she was…a lie? He thinks he should not be quick to assume anything.

“How did you…?”

“Over many, many conversations. At first I thought he was delusional, clinical denial.”

“It’s not?”

“No. The daughter is a fabrication, a surrogate for the actual person he lost but does not want to talk about. He uses the daughter for therapy. Sometimes I think our conversations were helpful, he seemed to take what he needed from them.”

“Who is the actual person?’

“He never told me. I never questioned him directly about fabricating the daughter. His true psychological issue remains undiagnosed. He uses her as a means of focus so that he never has to disclose the situation or event that prompted his…grief.”

“So you talked around it, tried to get him to open up, to trust.”

“Without success. I think he wants to open up, but not with me.”

“Why send him to me?”

“From what I have been able to infer, I think you might remind Victor of the person he grieves for and because of that, you might perhaps reach him where I have failed.”

“What did you infer?”

“Better that you find out on your own rather than risk my observations clouding your objectivity and your own observations. But he grieves for a man, and I suspect a lot of emotions are involved. You will find him…unique, I am certain.”

“So, the therapist who treats Victor needs to understand that preserving his fantasy allows him to talk about the salient issues upon which the fantasy is predicated. The fantasy is his safety net. Talk around it and he takes what he needs and hopefully will come around to admitting the truth to himself.”

“I think so. And when that happens, you will not see Victor anymore. He is self-reliant though I imagine he would be generous in his gratitude should your therapy provide him with that breakthrough. He is a most thoughtful person, prone to grand gestures and largesse. And…I should warn you, easily offended if his generosity is refused.”

“Cesca, transferring his feelings for his lost love to his psychiatrist is not therapy, it is displacement, redirection. And displacement leads to sublimation. He may very well transfer his feelings for the other person to me. I can’t have him fixate on me because…

“Daniel, I can’t help him. You…your understanding of empathy might draw him out. Ordinarily I would agree that when transference occurs between patient and therapist in the displacement of emotions and associations with a past relationship, the consequences are not productive. But sublimation of repressed feelings can result in a reaffirmation and allow new associations to replace the repressed ones.”

Daniel bites at the inside of his cheek as he gazes at Dumont. He is certain she did not merely drag her feet about calling him about her patient as much as avoiding doing so altogether. She is relieved Victor acted on his own initiative. She was counting on it. Daniel can feel the satisfaction from her sticking to him like a gloss of cotton candy and it feels just as cloying.

“And what is he to do with the new associations he makes with me? You are asking me to invite displaced *libido* at the very least and displaced *mortido* at the worst when he perceives his feelings are not reciprocated. Does he present with aggressive tendencies?”

Daniel thinks of the sudden chill and the vacuum of air he had felt when Victor had erroneously assumed he was being referred and Daniel had wasted his time. Victor’s expression had not changed. Just cold airlessness had emanated from him, a vortex of ice and Victor at the center of it. And then, nothing. His office had felt agreeable and warm once again.

“I have never seen Victor do anything untoward. He is thoughtful, polite, and sadly…suffering from a dysphoria that keeps him from making the social ties he so desperately needs. You could be the bridge he needs to find his way out of the past into the present. I have great confidence in you.”

“I have learned a bit about him and everything you say concurs.”

“If your working relationship becomes unproductive or untenable, refer him out. He’ll find ways to cope.” She sets down her cup, “A patient cannot force you to treat him.”

Dumont chuckles pleasantly over her tea, but Daniel is feeling like she has unloaded a very time consuming patient, one who will require kid gloves to treat. The timing is miserable and Daniel can’t help the prickle of aggravation crawling up his spine. Normally, he would step up to a challenge like Victor’s, provided the referring psychiatrist had prepped him first. This feels like an ambush.

Will’s immediate issues consume most of his time and efforts and where Will is concerned, there is never a dull moment. There is barely time to recuperate and anticipate the next crisis. Daniel rubs at his eyes, wishing the headache away. Victor and Dumont can wait for another day when he feels better. He just wants to go home and become a vegetable on his own couch.

“Well,” Daniel says finishing off his cup of tea, “why don’t you call up to the main house and I’ll be on my way. It has been a most interesting day, and night, and morning with you.”

“I think it’s safe to say that we have managed to forge a rather unconventional working relationship.”

“This is as unconventional as I can handle. Do you mind if we just stick to the dogs next weekend?” Daniel says, already creating excuses to reschedule.

Du Maurier picks up her phone. She is confident she’ll be hearing from Clayton before next weekend after his session with Victor. She has now ensured that he will confer with her about Hannibal regularly. She will likely hear from Hannibal, too. She has presumed upon his gift. His Wednesday appointment should prove sufficiently engaging for him.

“Just the dogs, then.” She says.

Lost are we, and are only so far punished, That without hope we live on in desire.

Inferno Canto IV

Will makes a dog-eared flap and closes Daniel’s copy of Dante’s Divine Comedy. He rubs at his eyes thinking of the passage he just read. Dante has entered Limbo, the circle where lost souls live out eternity in an existence fashioned out of their own imagination. They are punished for being lost, lost to the light of Christ through no fault of their own.

Unlike the lost souls in Dante’s Limbo, Will has placed himself in a limbo of sorts. He feels like he is treading water, neither sinking nor reaching the shore. He has not heard from the twins and is beginning to feel anxious about that. If he does not hear from them soon, he will hear from Mason. Will definitely does not want that. He has not contacted Jack and he knows he should, but talking to Jack will invite memories he does not want to dwell upon.

Hannibal thinks you are his man in the room. I think you're mine.

He has not looked at his files in weeks. He has not opened any of the emails in his mailbox when he has checked for messages from the twins. He is no closer to finding Hannibal than he was nearly four months ago. Hannibal must be killing…and cooking; it is his nature. He kills and leaves no breadcrumbs for Will's imagination to detect and no crime scenes for Will to reconstruct. Hannibal does not want to be found.

Will is treading water and he has nearly abandoned all hope of finding Hannibal. No wonder his stream has vanished from his dreams, replaced by an inferno of his own creation. He will remain there living on in desire of finding Hannibal so he can have his reckoning. Will thinks Daniel might throw him out before he finds Hannibal. He finds himself wondering how much darkness Daniel will abide before deciding he has had enough for one lifetime.

A rustling of feathers and the scrape of sharp talons across the concrete outside draws Will's attention from the book in his hands to the patio doors. He gets up from the couch and walks to the French doors opening them slowly. His heart thumps in his chest.

No…not here…

All our destinies flying and swimming in blood and emptiness.

No…

He walks onto the patio to find the familiar cracks in the baked concrete, deep fissures broken apart so that he has to step around and over to avoid tripping. The serpent tailed eagle beckons from where Daniel's garage once stood now reduced to rubble, jagged stones and charred wood. Will surveys the damaged dystopia before him, all of Fiesole laid waste like Pompeii. He searches the burned out landscape for the wolf.

The eagle continues to wait, flapping its huge wings amidst a circle of dust and debris. At last, the grey wolf emerges from the smoke, hugging at the corner of what is left of Daniel's house. It pants and lumbers towards Will its large eyes looking past him to the eagle at his back. The wolf halts at Will's side, nudges his leg with its wet nose and together they approach the black and bloodied creature as it preens slick feathers bearing the taint of its last meal.

Before Will and the wolf can reach it, the serpent's tail thrashes against the splintered wood and debris. The wolf growls low, its fur raised along its back though it remains at Will's side. Will feels the chill of anticipation in his gut, feels the rumble of the thing that dwells there, and feels the searing blisters that break open above his shoulder blades.

But these sensations are secondary. At the same time, the great black eagle takes its own serpent's tail in its mouth and rips it from its body, tosses it on the cracked pavement to quiver and bleed between them. Will watches the tail writhe and slither across the cement, encircling itself as a head grows from the gnarled bleeding flesh where the eagle had ripped it away.

The wolf bares its fangs, snarling at the terrace below and Will sees the familiar viper winding its way up the hill toward them, it slithers from side to side, its progresses unperturbed by the shadow of the black winged creature that stands above.

The serpent's tail has become another viper, an extension of the creature that watches from the shadows, and it waits coiled for the other. To Will, the vipers appear identical until both vipers face each other and he can observe more closely. The scales along the back of the viper from the eagle ripple with black oily feathers that glisten in the gray light of the broken sky. The other viper is sleek and long. Its scales pulse along its body as it begins to circle, its mouth open ready to strike.

Will sees that no feathers crown its head, no plumes glisten along its back. Its fangs drip with its poison, droplets of decay strike the ground and distill into a corrosive froth. Will stands flexing his shoulders against the points of razor sharp bone he knows are slicing through his flesh. The vipers strike, each seeking weakness, fangs exposed as they tangle around each other. The wolf follows and Will stumbles after it, leaving the tailless creature behind them.

The vipers tumble and roll, hissing heads stabbing at each other. Will notices the wolf fidgeting and pacing finally crouching, its muscles tense and still. Will knows it is about to spring.

No…

But Will is too late. The wolf has the sleek viper by the tail while the feathered viper attacks at the front. The skirmish is swallowed up by the dust and smoke, and Will can barely make out what is happening right before his eyes. The terrifying threesome rolls down the hill and Will cannot tell who is biting whom. An anguished howl rises above the smoke and Will's chest tightens as he stumbles over slippery soot stained stones.

When Will reaches the crest of the hill he sees through the searing smoke that the vipers are gone. The body of the wolf lay on its side taking great gasps of air, ears flat, body limp. He has to climb down over piles of debris and rubble to get to his wounded companion in this dreadful and dangerous place. The smoke stings his eyes but he can blink that away. He has to get to the wolf.

As Will slides down to the bottom of the hill the smoke thickens opaque as soup leaving a film on all it touches. Will can smell decay like ripe carrion and he climbs blindly toward the landing where he last saw the wolf. As he approaches waving his arms to clear the smoke, he finds not the wolf but a man, sprawled upon his back eyes closed in slumber. Will thinks he is wrapped in something that shimmers but he can't be sure. The cloud of smoke hovers close, every breath burning Will's nostrils as he makes his way closer.

What do you see, Will?

Will hears Hannibal's voice from behind him and turns to see the serpent tailed eagle looming over him, its viper's tail twitching from side to side. Will stands rigid as its great black wings fold around him drawing him close. He twists away from the dark wings that would draw him closer still.

Will kneels down next to the dark haired man reclining on the rocks and debris. As the smoke drifts away Will's breath catches in his throat. He leans closer. The man is Daniel, or he looks like him and he is wrapped in glossy diaphanous wings that rustle beneath as they unfold from around his naked body and spread lustrous and unsoiled by the ashes falling around them. Soft white feathers nestle around his shoulders as he opens his eyes to gaze into Will's.

Daniel? You have wings…

So do you.

Will feels along his shoulders his fingers finding smooth skin. His clothes are gone and his eyes grow wide as he reaches back, feels the down of feathers sprouting from his shoulder blades. He touches the silky plumes and stands upright so the wings, his wings can open wide. Muscles ache along his back; his bones move strangely, the weight of the wings extending from his body unwieldy. His wings are not the frosty white of Daniel's. Will frowns at the slick black feathers that mingle with the dark feathers of the creature bending over him casting its shadow wide and deep.

Daniel lifts his head from the scorched ground; his green eyes clear and bright as he draws Will's gaze away from the dark wings that grace his shoulders; the sight of them tearing at his heart. Will knows Daniel can feel his pain; he can see it mirrored in Daniel's eyes.

Hot tears scald Will's face and he shakes his head at Daniel, hating that he stands with the creature. Daniel's eyes soften at Will. He shifts to rest upon his elbow, skin flawless and perfect in his nakedness as he looks up from the shadows. His words fall from lips too pure for this place of deadly revelations and flat announcements of disaster.

Will, the devil is not as black as he is painted.

Daniel stretches out his hand to Will and his brow furrows when Will hesitates to take it, hesitates to bring him to stand at his side beneath the canopy of darkness and destruction. Daniel does not belong here. Will does not want him here, in this place.

Do you see, Will?

Hannibal whispers, feathers brushing across Will's nose and lashes.

I see lies and deceptions…

Will sees what the lies and deceptions have done to his forest and his stream. He sees ruin clear to the horizon and needs to walk no further to know there is no end to it. He will never reach the horizon in this nightmare that follows him out of his dreams.

You see your own lies and deceptions. See him. On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Will kneels down to look into Daniel's face. He sees no mask, finds no deception in the twin pools of green that reflect only light and air and color.

Will?

Will…

"Can you see me? Will! You are looking right at me…"

Will blinks and Daniel's hands are waving in front of him, shadow and light play across his face as Will sucks in air and presses his body against the solid cushions of the couch. The expression on his face must be distressing judging by the concern all over Daniel's face.

Daniel leans over him, tugs at his perspiration soaked tee and Will feels his fingers warm and real in his hair. Will inhales the scent of ocean that descends from Daniel, the mist collects in his mind and Will imagines condensation trickling through his limbs deeper into the very marrow of his bones.

“Where were you? What did you dream?”

“I was in my inferno…with him. And you.”

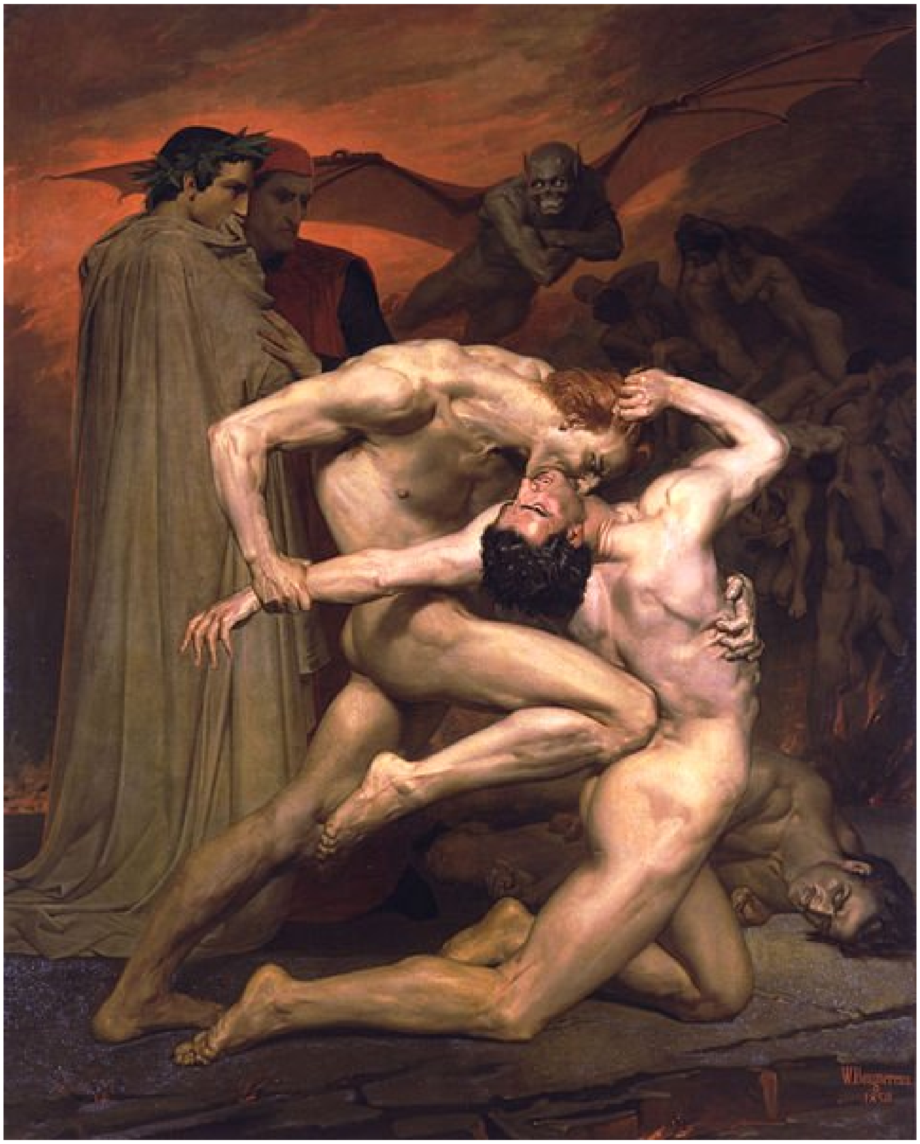
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

> Daniel helps Will with some dream interpretation and sees more deeply into his patient's dark pathology.
>
> Daniel tries not to fixate on the epitome of oral fixations staring him in the face. Watching Will wrap his lips around the tip of the cigarette is torturous. Daniel has to consciously keep his thumb out of his mouth.
>
> “Well, I have to tell you that I am a little embarrassed about some of the imagery in my dreams…” Will says.
>
> “Don’t be. I dream about you naked all the time and there is no symbolism in my dreams. No inferno, no classical framework. My dreams are wish fulfillment, unapologetically pornographic.”
>
> Will rolls his eyes and sighs. Blows more smoke through pretty pink lips.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



William-Adolphe Bouguereau's *Dante and Virgil in Hell* (1850)

Chapter 51

Daniel helps Will with some dream interpretation and sees more deeply into his patient's dark pathology.

The dogs nudge at his legs, tails wagging furiously, ecstatic he is home, and Daniel rubs them down as he watches Will collect himself, fists rubbing along his thighs and knees, compulsively reminding himself where he is by touch. It seems to Daniel that Will’s waking dreams are saturated with as much texture and sensation as his reality. Reality may be a shared experience, but it is perceived subjectively, unique to each individual and no one more so than Will; who exists in the surreal. He exists in his own universe and has been merely visiting Daniel in his. It seems to Daniel that Will is as ready as he'll ever be for the guided hypnotherapy. It is the only way Daniel can share in Will's reality.

Will's resistance to his own mind is impressive. He retreats into its recesses yet he manages to interact with his environment without giving in to the dark impulses he harbors deep within himself. Daniel has never met anyone with such a powerful imagination and the inner strength to avoid succumbing to it. A weaker person would be a raging psychopath. Will is not only strong minded, he is intelligent; he is also kind and decent, and those impulses are equally as strong as the dark ones.

His dual nature is the *raison d'etre* for his current predicament. Will cannot reconcile his dual nature. Either heaven misplaced one of its most beautiful angels or hell is missing one of its most seductive demons. Will seems to be both. And Lecter had been drawn to him like Odysseus to the siren. Daniel cannot fault Lecter for that.

The more Will has shared with Daniel, the more Daniel has come to think that Lecter does know Will better than he knows himself. This is not a comforting thought. Lecter is accomplished at many things; psychiatry is only one of them. Figuring out that an individual drawn to the violence of crime scenes harbors some violent thoughts himself is *not* a feat of psychiatric brilliance; it is deduction. Inducing that individual to acknowledge and indulge his violent fantasies *is* a feat of psychiatric brilliance.

Learning that Will actually reimagined the crime by becoming the killer must have really flicked Lecter's switch. Because Will had gushed honesty like a fountain to his trusted therapist, Lecter had surmised that his patient suffered nightmares not because the violence upset him so much, but because he feared how much he enjoyed it. Damn right his own sense of decency had been shocked by the images in his mind. Lecter had flicked Will's switch with Hobbs.

He had forced Will to do what he had always feared. To kill. Lecter took Will's sense of right and wrong and turned it upside down. Lecter had forced Will to acknowledge the zest he felt was not righteousness, but the simple thrill of killing. Righteousness is a concept easily adapted to one's whims, especially if one perceives oneself on par with god. Or the devil.

Lecter believed Will was ignoring parts of himself, that Will was experiencing unconscious wish fulfillment so to test his theory he manufactured the means to allow the dreamer to make his dreams real. And Will hates him for it. Loves him despite it. Will had parroted Lecter's belief they were just alike to reinforce his position of influence. And Lecter had known that repeating that mantra consciously would reinforce the power of that mantra in Will's subconscious. Because to Lecter's thinking, Will's subconscious dreaming is wish fulfillment. Fulfilling Will's dreams is important to Lecter. All he ever wanted was what was best for Will.

Everyone should have a therapist like Hannibal Lecter. With friends like Lecter, who needs enemies?

Daniel thinks Lecter's attraction to Will, his need to possess Will is probably the most normalized approximation of humanity Lecter had ever exhibited. An anomaly in his pathology. Hannibal had not known what to do with his feelings for Will any more than Will knows what to do with his feelings. Lecter believes that what he feels for Will is love.

Daniel supposes that whatever Lecter feels for Will is the closest he has ever come to actually loving another being besides himself. He does not doubt that Will is aware of this. What else but love could cause a psychopath like Lecter to wound his obsession so viciously yet let him live.

Lecter is a cold and calculating killer. His actions regarding Will that night in his kitchen had been anything but cold.

Hopefully, Will wants to concentrate his incredible inner strength on liberating himself from the self-imposed exile of his imagination. He needs to see a clear path to accomplish that. As his therapist, Daniel can help him do that. That is what rational Will wants him to deliver. In order to help him, Daniel needs to see Will's universe as it truly is; not the sanitized and abridged version he presents to Daniel.

There is one other disturbing thought that plagues Daniel. Chilton's nasty diatribe contained a kernel of truth. Lecter has effectively neutralized the one person who could catch him. The survival instinct in Lecter must have recognized his affection for Will as a weakness. As long as Will is unable or unwilling to pursue him, it is highly unlikely the FBI or anyone else will ever find him. Lecter will allow only his beloved Will that honor.

Will sits staring at the fireplace, physically here in the room with him, but his mind is still soaring. Daniel has observed Will is becoming ever more absorbed in his inner universe. He hardly touches his phone. Daniel knows the calls and messages from Verger and Crawford go unanswered. Daniel has checked his laptop to see if Will works on the case files, follows leads, anything to suggest he still hunts for Lecter. He doesn't.

Aside from a little clothes shopping and the trip to get his CAT scan, Will stays close. He has yet to get a haircut and seems not to notice the ringlets that brush well past his collar. He is in limbo in both of his realities. The fire that claimed his residence has allowed Will to claim his independence. Daniel doubts that Will intends to clue the FBI or Verger in on his whereabouts anytime soon. Will is not going to lead either Jack Crawford or Mason Verger to Lecter, and he never intended to. From what he has learned of Will, from what he feels from him, he is certain that Will wants his reckoning with Lecter to be a private affair.

Daniel looks at the mantle clock, an electric relic from his grandmother. Its smooth walnut finish and clouded glass face with Roman numerals reminds him of the old city row house she lived in, a place he associates with his childhood. It is one of the few pieces of home that Daniel brought with him to Florence.

It is also one of the pieces that draws Will like a magnet. Daniel observes Will contemplating the old clock from the roost he has taken up on his end of the couch. Will has his habits and assuming the same spot on the same cushion every time he takes up space on the couch is one of them. Daniel wonders how long Will had been sitting there before he walked in.

"I was with you in your inferno?"

Will looks up at Daniel, blue eyes clouded with gray, but sharply alert and his mouth set in a stubborn line. Daniel feels the sadness tear his chest. His own nausea and soreness from last night pales to the throb of the wound across his stomach that is especially acute right now. He experiences tightness in his gut whenever he is with Will and Daniel has gotten used to it. Unfortunately, this means that Will has become accustomed to the psychological pain of it, too.

Daniel thinks he thrives on it. Saint Will has not punished himself enough yet; his wound the equivalent of mental flagellation. These dreams and hallucinations are eating Will up from the inside out. Will is eating himself up from the inside out. Once he let Daniel into the fringes of his private universe, the one he shared with Lecter, his precious forts began to leak and the floodgates Daniel has been expecting to open since their first meeting are about to burst.

Daniel hates seeing him do this to himself. He imagines Will ripping his own heart out of his chest and tearing it apart in his hands, blood and ravaged muscle twisted in his teeth. Daniel knows Will has not told him everything. There are gaps in the narrative he has shared and the dreams, well; the dreams have been carefully edited. Like everything that has to do with Lecter, Will holds them close. Like his hate. But, Will is not hateful by nature and keeping the hate pure is difficult, keeping such a malignant emotion close is toxic.

His dreams have been sacrosanct; he feeds Daniel only the morsels he wants him to taste. He believes he is protecting Daniel by keeping the prime portions to himself. Daniel needs those cherished chunks to help Will whether Will wants him to have them or not.

Daniel licks at his lips. They are still parched despite draining twenty ounces of spring water out of a plastic bottle on the ride home. His mouth is a desert.

He feels like baked shit warmed over, but this dream has really shaken Will up and his concern overrides his physical discomfort. He tries not to yawn to give Will an excuse to make light of this recent descent into his own private hell.

“Will? This is the first time I was in there with you?”

“Yeah, it’s getting crowded in there…”

“Will…” Daniel begins and lets it drop. Humor is a coping mechanism of Will’s, and at least it is a healthy one.

Will looks to the door rather than into Daniel’s face. Daniel can already read too much and he will want to talk about it. He will want Will to talk about it because the worry Will sees in his eyes is genuine. But Will sees the fatigue, too. Daniel is mentally hammered, and Will is not going to forget what he just experienced if Daniel takes a nap or a shower. Daniel doesn’t need to hear about it right now. He needs to recuperate.

“Tell me about it.” Daniel sits down beside him on the couch. “Please. This one was different, wasn’t it?”

“I’m ok, Daniel. You just walked in the door. It can wait.” Will notices the tense way Daniel holds his jaw, the tired creases around his eyes robbing him of his usual vibrant visage.

“How do you know I just walked in the door? Did you see me?”

“I doubt you would have stood there watching me for too long. Really…I could use a little time to reflect, gather my thoughts. I know you want to hear all about it and I won’t disappoint.”

“I’m not going to let this go. Your dreams are intruding on your waking life.”

“I know. Critical mass. You think I am going to snap. I’m not.”

“Honestly? I have no idea what you might do, but I do know that’s something’s got to give and I would rather whatever it is happen under controlled conditions, with me. What do you think?”

Will looks up and nods at his psychiatrist, his friend. He manages a wrecked wrinkle of a smile as he imagines the winged Daniel in his inferno seated next to him.

One of these things doesn’t belong here…

“You want to talk about your rough night?” Will says watching Daniel smack his lips and leap up from the couch. He stretches his arms over his head and cracks his neck.

“Not really.”

Daniel walks to the fridge and yanks out a bottle of water. Guzzles it empty leaving the fridge open and tosses it into the recycle bucket near the back door. He pulls out another bottle, cracks it open.

“That bad?”

“On so many levels. I don’t know if I want to punch the shit out of something or fall asleep in the shower.”

“I’d go for the punching…falling asleep in the shower sounds dangerous.”

“I clearly have to threaten Maria with bodily harm if she takes on another new patient.”

“I thought you took on the wine princess personally.”

Daniel starts up the steps, “Oh, this is another patient. You sure you’re ok? I would like to get a shower, change my clothes.”

“Go lie down for a while.”

Will waves him off. He picks up *The Divine Comedy* from the coffee table where he left it, opens it to the dog-eared flap and begins to read. Daniel watches him for a moment.

“Tell you what. I’ll lie down if you write down your dream. A narrative with annotations about what you think the symbolism is. And then place this dream into some context, chronological or otherwise with the rest of them.”

Anything else? Will looks aside, chews on his lip so the sarcasm settles silent and restless on his tongue. Daniel is his psychiatrist and this is therapy. Every minute he spends with Daniel is essentially therapy. He wonders how Daniel feels about that.

“Will?”

Will forgets Daniel doesn’t actually read his mind, though it feels like it sometimes.

“Okay.”

Daniel’s eyes roam around the living room and kitchen, and he notices the orange peels and coffee mug on the sink.

“Did you eat anything beside that orange today?”

A weary sigh wafts from the couch as Will pushes off to rise to his feet. “I’ll fix us some lunch. There’ll be something good for a hangover when you come down.”

“And just to add to your anxiety, I want to hear all about Alia, too.”

Daniel hopes Will had a positive experience with the pretty detective. She seems able to wriggle her way past Will’s dense defenses.

“Only if you’re going to reciprocate.” Will says evenly. When Daniel doesn’t answer, Will smiles.

“I didn’t think so.” He says as he watches Daniel climb the stairs.

He sets the paperback down and ambles to the kitchen and opens the fridge, dogs in tow. He frowns at Cara and Bella who have taken up positions on either side of him, mouths open in anticipation. Will decides they are very spoiled dogs.

Daniel did not come back downstairs for a few hours. Will had let him sleep. While Daniel had slept, Will had done as he had asked. The time had passed quickly as Will had filled page after page of the spiral notebook with the details of his dreams. Will has written down his progression of dreams chronologically for Daniel and the act of writing has brought clarity to the scattered associations he has already made. He has gathered up the associations from the dark recesses and committed them to the sunlit pages Daniel now holds in his hands.

As Daniel reads over Will’s notations replete with underlining and arrows, Will thinks again how insane he is. How insane he must appear to Daniel.

He wonders how Daniel even lets him stay here. Perhaps madness is contagious.

He leans back in the kitchen chair, hands resting in his lap listening to Vivaldi, violin concertos of course, while Daniel reads his missive of madness. He watches Daniel’s expressions, tries to imagine what Daniel feels behind the glimmer of green, what thoughts pass through his mind as smoke from his cigarette drifts across the remains of their lunch.

Daniel has been writing in the margins and drawing circles around what Will imagines are key passages. At last, he clicks the pen a few times, and glances over the last page before finally setting the pen down. Will allows Daniel’s calm mist to ease into his mind, a cloud to absorb the dread.

Daniel pushes the notebook across the table at Will. He draws on the cigarette as he looks into Will’s eyes. Will had expressed his thoughts with his characteristic caustic wit and candor. Daniel knows he is the only person with whom Will has shared this secret part of himself and while reading page after page of Will’s wild imagination has raised questions, much of it has confirmed what Daniel had already suspected.

That he can see what Will cannot tells him a lot about Will’s state of mind. Will sits quietly in his chair, a bemused expression on his face, a paragon of paradox wrapped in a pretty package. Daniel stifles the urge to give him a hug or something equally sentimental. He’s a little emotional himself and a rebuff from Will, no matter how gentle would nag at him and diminish the professional demeanor he needs to take with Will this afternoon.

And it is afternoon. Will had let Daniel sleep the rest of the morning away until the sun was well on its way back toward the western horizon.

Daniel takes another thoughtful pull of nicotine off his cigarette. His bad habit helps him think, gives him time to edit what he is about to say. He sees apprehension, but he also feels relief coming off Will as hope swims behind the blue; hope that the burden he has been carrying will not be quite as heavy as it was before.

“You…are a Freudian wet dream.” Daniel says as Will rolls his eyes and presses his lips together in a tight line. Daniel waits for the smile and it does come…eventually.

“Well, what does it all mean, Sigmund?” Will says as he flicks at the crumbs on the table.

“I think the narcissist in Hannibal would be extremely flattered by all the attention he receives. There is nothing in your dreamscape that is not connected to him in some fashion.”

“My, but that was astute.”

“Let me ask you this. How do you see the dreams? What function do they serve?”

“Dreams are windows into the subconscious. Pressure valves for the stress we experience during our waking moments.”

“That’s how they function for most people. Most of us don’t remember our dreams. How do they function for you?”

“In a Freudian sense?”

“If you want to start there, we can.”

“Freud would say my dreams are a combination of latent and manifest desires, probably sexual. A psychoanalytical interpretation would indicate a lot of…repression.”

“There is some sexual content in your dreams, but I think he would agree that your dreams are about fear and aggression.”

“Aggression? Me?”

Daniel can’t help but smile. Will is such a loveable asshole.

“Everything you think about during the day becomes memory. Memory fuels your dreams along with the emotions you associate with the memories. You remember your dreams; think about them during your waking hours. Your memories are stuck on replay. Why do you think that is?’

“Because I am still traumatized?”

“That’s one way of putting it. If I thought I knew how to ride a bike and then crashed it, I would think twice before trying to ride the bike again.”

“This *thing* with Hannibal is way more complicated than riding a bike.”

“And your dreams are way more complicated than mine, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t know what you dream about.”

“Well, I sure as hell don’t dream about hell. Or the *Iliad*. Or imagining myself and my therapist as nude angels…”

“You made your point.” Will rubs his face with his hands and leaves his palms plastered over his eyes. “I think I am losing my mind…again.”

“Jung thought dreams were subconscious messages the dreamer needed to pay attention to.”

“I would agree with that.”

“So do I. We agree your subconscious is trying to tell you things. So we can assume your dreams serve that function. Your imagination provides an unlimited playground, too.”

“But my fears are specific and that’s why my dreamscapes are limited.”

“Limited to Hannibal. Your universe is very small Will. I am surprised you fit me in there.”

“Probably a slow night at the Graham dream factory…”

Daniel kicks at Will’s feet under the table. There are likely sexual undertones to Will’s nude renderings in his dreams, but his representation of Daniel could be a classical allusion and it carries a coded message cloaked in the mythical universe Will has adopted as his own. Daniel does not think Will’s inferno should be restricted to Christian interpretation. The thread of Greek mythology runs thick through Will’s, and Lecter’s universe.

“Are you familiar with Gestalt therapy?” Daniel asks him.

“Familiar enough to know I’ve never been subjected to it.”

“No, I guess you haven’t. Well, that’s what I’m going for. Very expanded Gestalt.”

“Gestalt is focused more on what’s happening in the immediate environment and less about what happened in the past. It uses all the patient’s experiences. Rather appropriate I guess.”

“You and I need to be able to tell the difference between what is actually being perceived and felt in the current situation and separate that from the residue of your past.”

“You want me to understand who I am, not who I was.”

“Right. The past does influence the present, but you exist too much in the past. Agreed?’

“Agreed.”

“And as far as understanding who you are; it doesn’t have to be either this or that, Will. I think you think you have to choose…”

“Between who I was and who I am…now?”

“Between perspectives. Your experiences have changed you, but you insist on applying a past perspective on the now. It’s all about seeing, Will.”

“I need to alter my perspective to adapt to the way I think.”

Your design is evolving. Your choices affect the physical structures of your brain.

Killing is changing the way I think.

“I think so. You have been manipulated with behavior modification; you have been overly subjected to it and it would not be a desirable approach in this instance anyway, and rather than rely on a psychoanalytic approach that depends on the transference between patient and therapist to identify the issues, I want to engage in some directed awareness using your dreams to accomplish that. You spend an awful lot of time there."

Daniel thinks that since Will with his dual nature exists in at least two realities at any given time, that no other approach makes sense. Two sides of him constantly shuffling back and forth between realities can only go on for so long.

"Directing my conscious awareness wouldn't get us anywhere." Will says.

"It has gotten us this far. You trust me. I trust you. I have been modeling the kind of immediate awareness I want from you and I have been allowing you complete access to me, physically and emotionally."

"The sex is therapy, too?"

"Seriously, Will?"

Daniel frowns. Sex is a troublesome topic for Daniel. His feelings for Will have become very complicated. Daniel is becoming aware that he does not like being a surrogate for Lecter, no matter how…therapeutic it is.

He reminds himself this is not the time… Will is talking and Daniel shifts the focus of his gaze from watching Will's tongue trip lazily over his lips to the empty glasses on the cluttered table. *Damn him.*

"You have allowed a positive interpersonal relationship to develop naturally rather than try to manipulate or force an outcome." Will says, long tapered fingers rubbing at whiskers, "You didn't plan on becoming…intimate, but you allowed it to happen. You didn't stop it. You didn't plan on my place burning down, but you took advantage of that, too."

"I recognized that conventional therapy wouldn't work with you. Your trust in psychiatrists is not especially encouraging. I had to do the opposite of what Lecter did. He is clearly into behaviorism. I can't undo what he did, Will. I *can* help you understand who you are now."

"You didn't trust the usual doctor patient dynamic would work with me."

"I believed you wouldn't trust it. You would not trust me if you even suspected you were being manipulated. You chafe under authority. You question everything I do as it is." Daniel smiles to soften the blow of that blunt observation.

"So you had to trust that I would eventually trust you."

"I hoped." Daniel says, surprised at the sudden raise of Will's brows. "Boundaries and trust. We seem to have worked those out pretty well."

Will nods towards the cigarettes and Daniel slides them over. Will thinks the trust he has in Daniel is well placed. Well placed enough that there are very few boundaries left to…negotiate. He understands they are negotiating one more as they sit here. He slips a cigarette between his lips, lights it and inhales. He watches the smoke dissipate and disappear much like his anxiety when Daniel is near. Daniel does have a way making him feel more together and less like disintegrating into the well of hopelessness he finds himself sinking in when he is alone.

Daniel tries not to fixate on the epitome of oral fixations staring him in the face. Watching Will wrap his lips around the tip of the cigarette is torturous. Daniel has to consciously keep his thumb out of his mouth.

“Well, I have to tell you that I am a little embarrassed about some of the imagery in my dreams…” Will says.

“Don’t be. I dream about you naked all the time and there is no symbolism in my dreams. No inferno, no classical framework. My dreams are wish fulfillment, unapologetically pornographic.”

Will rolls his eyes and sighs. Blows more smoke through pretty pink lips.

“Feel better?” Daniel says.

“Not really.”

“Speaking of wish fulfillment, your dreams don’t provide you with any. You want answers and insight and you wake up without any. You said you used to dream about killing Lecter. Those dreams were fulfilling, yes?”

Will thinks of his fingers wringing sheets while his body had rocked upon the mattress, cock swollen until blood soaked dreams brought him surging release and he had lain quiet and perspiring, white-knuckled and trembling with shame. Only then had his fingers relaxed, freeing fabric from his sweaty palms.

He had on occasion nearly lost his nut in Hannibal’s office, hallucinating while Hannibal had been pouring wine or whiskey on the other side of his office. He had taken the glass from Hannibal’s manicured and steady hands with a smile, lifting his eyes to meet Hannibal’s and draw them up and away from his trousers.

Hannibal had never let on if he knew one way or another. Infuriatingly polite…Hannibal.

“To a degree. At the time the dreams served to fuel my anger toward him, keep me focused.”

“Kept you distracted from other emotions about him.”

“That too.” Will sighs again, his discomfort becoming more apparent.

Daniel takes that as a signal of progress. Will won’t push himself into the uncomfortable places in his mind on his own. That is what Daniel knows he has to make him do. Like a personal athletic trainer, Daniel will have to push Will past the limitations he has set for himself. Because he stops when it begins to hurt.

Daniel understands Will has endured a lot of hurt already and it pains him to place Will in this position.

“Why the inferno?”

“You think I am punishing myself.”

“Are you?”

I dream more now than I used to.

Well, your dreams were the one place you could be physically safe, relinquishing control.

Not anymore.

“I don’t…feel good about where I am right now. I don’t know that I would characterize it as punishment. I feel lost. Like there is no solid ground. I wouldn’t call that punishing myself.”

“The antler man used to taunt you, right? He would symbolize Lecter’s interference.”

“That sounds about right. The ravenstag seemed to exist between the two of us. It led me to him, but it was a means to be him. Later, I imagined myself growing antlers when I put myself in his head. As I became aware the Ripper was Hannibal, the dreams changed, too. I would see the antler man in my dreams and when I was awake, but in a dream state.”

Will thinks of watching the antler man take the stand at his trial. Will had stared into those blank and black eyes while Hannibal had testified on his behalf. He is afraid he is going to start seeing the serpent tailed eagle perched on the furniture in Daniel’s house any day now.

“You think the thing twisting in your stomach trying to get out is like when you grew antlers?”

“I think so. A manifestation of becoming like him.”

“And it frightens you. You fear the eagle, too. Not because it might hurt you. You are aware you are dreaming when you see it. You are afraid of what it represents.”

We are alone without each other.

“Yes. I’m afraid this scar is going to split open and that thing inside is going to overtake me…”

“Like you sprouted wings in this recent dream.”

Daniel feels the fear though Will sits calmly beside him at the table. Of all the things he fears, he fears losing himself the most. He believes giving in to his impulses will erase his sense of self; that he will no longer know who he is. Daniel thinks Will would recognize himself in that Will. He doesn’t want to know him, but he already exists.

Of course Will has been quite aware of his dual nature for some time. He avoided it. He is fighting it now. Lecter found it and brought it out of Will. Will wants to believe the Will he became for Lecter was a fabrication, another Will he manufactured from his imagination for the purpose of luring Lecter since, to Will’s thinking, Lecter had brought out that part of him through his manipulation; a product of conditioning.

Will’s capacity for self-deception runs deep and wide. He wants to put the genie back in the bottle. And if he can’t, then he will blame Lecter’s mind fucking for it. Because Will needs to remain angry. He needs to keep the hate. The alternative is…unthinkable.

“The thing inside me resembles the eagle.” Will is saying.

“Hannibal, the serpent tailed eagle, interacts with you, talks to you, shows you things.”

“Daniel, I understand that the images I see in my dreams are my own design. I am talking to myself.”

“We are all talking to ourselves in our dreams. Everything in your dreams, animate or inanimate represents a part of you. I think you are in an uncomfortable place emotionally. You came here to find Hannibal. But you find yourself in limbo, like you said. You identify with Dante’s Inferno on some level because your subconscious is conforming to your emotions and your memories. Maybe you aren’t punishing yourself, but you do equate your existence with hell.”

“And I’m going to remain in it until I find him?”

“I think you’ll remain there until you give yourself a reason to leave. What was going on in your waking life when you entered the inferno?”

Will closes his eyes to remember. He had begun to lose time, he had dreamed of his snow covered forest in flames while he was still living at the palazzo. “Daniel…my dream about the forest changed the night after I called you about losing time.”

“The night before you came over for dinner, before the fishing trip.”

“Huh. That doesn’t bode well for you, does it?”

“I don’t think I prompted your inferno directly, but the realization that you were slipping into routines or habits you thought long gone might have. You said on the phone what you were experiencing did not feel like regression.”

“I said it felt like I never left.” Will nods his head. “Like I’m right back where I started.”

“On some level you equate that with hell. But you are also using this dreamscape to find Lecter.”

“I associate him with smoke and the devil. Among other things…”

“I’m not going to ask you to figure out the symbolism of each and every thing that pops up in your dreams. We could be here an eternity for that. But, I think you dream in Lecter’s universe because you never left. Part of you is still on the kitchen floor.”

“I dream about that a lot, too. I know.”

“And we both know one of the reasons you keep going back there. Will, why is it so important to know when and how Lecter realized you were deceiving him? You *had* been deceiving him. I don’t see how that changes anything that night. He didn’t leave because he was waiting for you, to punish you.”

Will knows it is the nature of the deceit that bothers him. He had to deceive Hannibal. Hannibal never let him explain…

“And maybe it is on that kitchen floor that I really entered my inferno. Because I’m sure I had him and he wouldn’t have hurt me without a really really good reason. He believed. Abigail…was for me. A surprise for me, a gift. But I surprised him and not long before that dinner date with Jack. He would have left with Abigail had he not figured something out.”

“You said he said they couldn’t leave without you.”

“That was Hannibal rubbing it in. He took a chance waiting for me to get to his house.”

“He knew you would come looking for Jack. Lecter didn’t know the FBI plan had fallen apart. To him, Jack had showed up alone, early…but alone just like he was supposed to. And you were supposed to join the fox in the hen house.”

“I told both of them I would be there.”

“Yes, you did, but we’ll get to that later. You told me he knew about you colluding with Jack.”

“He was aware. I talked to Jack on the phone right in front of Hannibal sometimes. He knew Jack wanted the real Ripper. I had convinced Hannibal that there were snares around both our necks. And that wasn’t far from the truth. We were playing with the FBI.”

“So you think it was Lounds.”

“Had to be. I didn’t know about Chilton, so it had to be Lounds.”

“But even if it was, Will why does it matter? The end result would be the same…”

“It matters to me. It makes a difference…”

Daniel blinks with the sinking feeling in his gut, like a brick just scraped its way down his throat and now sits cold and heavy in the pit of his stomach.

“You would have killed Lounds except for the FBI. Her phone call… She figured you and Hannibal out, but too soon. You couldn’t kill her and not because she would have spoiled Jack’s time table, but yours?”

“Hannibal would have killed her. We had talked about it. She wasn’t supposed to be at my house that day. If I had planned on bringing her to Jack, I could have told Jack to go pick her up. I actually didn’t know what to do about Lounds.”

“You thought about killing her.”

“For a nano-second. Hannibal would have been so pleased. That’s why I decided to give him that in a way that wouldn’t screw things up. That is what hooked him. And finding out I lied is what got me flayed.”

“Explain what you mean.”

“If he had gotten to her first, all hell would have broken loose. Alana would have disclosed our dinner conversation to Jack and Hannibal would have been under investigation, officially. There would have been no proof, no evidence either, just like all the rest. But killing Lounds would have been the last straw between me and Jack.

“If I had really killed her, Jack would have hung me out to dry. I was already under scrutiny for Tier. Purnell would have been all over Jack. She would have shut us down then. Jack’s hands would have been tied. I needed more time with Hannibal. Hannibal needed to believe there was a wedge between me and Jack. I needed Jack to trust me after Tier. And Lounds needed to shut up.”

“So you make Jack a co-conspirator. You regain control of the situation. You let Jack deal with the FBI so you can play with Hannibal. You couldn’t explain that to Hannibal?”

"I couldn't know what he would do with the information. He would have had doubts about me. We were already hip deep with the Vergers. I hinted at alternate means of taking care of Lounds, but I don't think my message was received. Once he gets an idea in his head, he is very hard to dissuade."

Daniel can only imagine how a conversation on the advantages of not killing someone might be frustrating with a psychopathic serial killer. Who is also your boyfriend. Daniel lights another cigarette.

"I need to know when he knew I had not killed Lounds because then I will know at what point he was deceiving me."

"He has been deceiving you from the beginning, Will…"

"Not with the intent to hurt me. Hannibal is compulsive about certain things. As long as he believed I was being truthful, he was truthful in return. When he learned the truth about Lounds, that reciprocity ceased. He would have offered misinformation about himself, more misdirection. But whatever he said before that…would have been honest."

Daniel had known that at some point in his seduction of Lecter, Will had allowed himself to enjoy his role playing. He had enjoyed the raw power of killing Tier, but entertaining the idea of killing outside of self-defense is a point of no return. He is certain that point came with Lounds. No wonder Will had dreamed of setting her body on fire. He had had to make himself believe, so he could convince Lecter who was no doubt watching him closely. And Will had enjoyed his visions of the fiery Lounds. He had been upset and shocked, again, at his own cruelty and lack of remorse.

Daniel thinks the only remorse Will had truly felt, was the remorse over what he had lost with Alana Bloom. He had had to endure her suspicions and recriminations, knowing that on some level, he was a bad person, doing bad things. Just not the bad things she had thought as she had hurled accusations at Will over Lounds' desecrated grave.

But, Daniel does not think this the time to discuss all that. He does have an agenda today, a loose one, but there is some ground left to cover before they call it quits. It is apparent to Daniel that Will's version of Hannibal is constantly shifting in his mind as Will contemplates an actual meeting. A meeting he is trying to prepare for and which becomes ominously more imminent with every passing day.

"You need the honest insight, the honest exchanges and disclosure to find him, to construct an updated version of Hannibal in your imagination. So you remember. You dream. You dream in his universe where you have spent every waking moment for the last…Christ Will. You have been in his head since…"

"Since I met him essentially. And, he has been in mine."

"First Hobbs haunted your dreams; then the Ripper…until you realized Hannibal was the Ripper."

"And then the fun really started."

"Will, your inferno reflects the limbo in your waking life. Your life shapes your inferno. You aren't hunting him anymore, are you?"

“My hunt is at a standstill. I have no new information. The twins are off the grid for some reason. Whatever they found about his past is with them. They have yet to send me anything else. I can feel Jack and Mason breathing down my neck…”

“You don’t need them, Will. You already have everything you need in your head. You’ve been immersed in his universe for a long time. You have been all over his office, his home, been in his head.”

I let you know me. See me…

“Then why haven’t I found what I’m looking for?”

“Your fear.”

Will grinds the cigarette into the ashtray so the fibers cling to his fingernails. “I don’t let my fear control me.”

“You experience all kinds of fear and you have faced it and managed it through some pretty awful experiences. But you are letting it control you now. This time your fear is directed at yourself. You know your way around your own head so well, that you can avoid where you don’t want to go.”

“I never believed I killed all those girls. I dug around in my head for evidence of that, and Hannibal’s influence.”

“And you found it. Because you wanted to prove your innocence. I might be less inclined to look for something that proved my guilt.”

“I don’t need to prove my guilt. I know what I’ve done. You think I want to be in that inferno? That I want to have those dreams?”

“No. But being there means you don’t have to be someplace else. The kind of fear you know is a comfortable companion now. If you find what you seek, then you have to act on it. A new fear. A new companion.”

“Hannibal. You want me to what? Find him? Kill him? Run off with him?”

“You have to finish this…one way or another. You cannot live your life in the land of what-if.”

“What life? I am…miserable, Daniel. I have boxed myself into a mental corner.”

“When you find what you seek, you will thrill to it. And you will hate yourself for wanting the thrill. But that is who you are.”

“I know who I am, Daniel.”

Adapt. Evolve. Become.

“Yes, I think you do. You already have all your answers in your head. You always have.”

“Then why am I wasting time in my inferno?” Will snaps without meaning to.

Daniel does not respond with his usual quick smile and placating words. He’s feeling what Will is feeling and he’s tired of Will’s misplaced anger being directed at him. Will’s anger sets off Daniel’s frustration like a chemical reaction. The barrier between his emotions and Will's has become porous, dangerously so. Will is infuriatingly stubborn.

"You carry incredible guilt for the things you were compelled to do. You believe you should be punished for that, but who is really qualified to punish you after all you've been through? Not the FBI. You should be locked up right now, but the FBI thinks you will lead them to Lecter. You want your reckoning but you haven't decided how you want that to play out. So you wait. In your inferno. For what sin are you punishing yourself?"

Do you remember the circles of hell, Will?

> *I was euphoric when I killed Freddie Lounds.*

Most of them, why?

Consider the ninth circle as you contemplate your…present situation.

"I'll bet it's not for murder, is it?"

Will simply stares at Daniel wide-eyed in shock. He feels heat rising up his neck. Not from embarrassment or shame, but anger. And he does not even know at whom or what he is angry, but he is seething with it. With every word that came out of Daniel's mouth, the heat had spread like a fire consuming him, like hell itself.

Will closes his eyes and breathes until he feels his jaw slacken, until he stops grinding his teeth. Daniel is very perceptive. He read between the lines of Will's chronicle of crazy and quickly diagnosed his patient. Will shouldn't be angry at him. He should be angry at himself.

He has condemned himself for his own treachery. A personal offense against the plaid suited god himself. Condemned himself for his betrayal. Of Hannibal. The psychopath. The serial killer he has hunted for two years. The man who ripped his mind apart and fed him people. He feels more guilt about that, than for anything else he has done.

He is insane.

Perhaps in addition to his diagnosis, Daniel came up with a remedy…for this insanity. At least return him to the kind of crazy Will is used to. Will swallows the bitter pill of managing his expectations once again. He takes a deep breath before turning his attentions back to Daniel.

"How do I get out?" Will says.

"How did Dante get out?" Daniel counters.

Will grinds his jaw. Of course Daniel would ask him that. "He climbed up Satan's back to the cliffs to look at the stars."

"And how did he leave hell?"

"On the wings of…an eagle." Will says slowly. "The eagle flew him to Purgatory."

"And from there he found Paradise. Will, eventually, your mind will open up those locked doors."

"You want to be there when I open the doors."

“Yes. I want to open you up with drugs and hypnotherapy so that you can’t block anymore.”

“You think I am blocking my feelings about Hannibal. Well, I’m clearly in touch with them.”

“Then why is your therapist in your dreams?”

“I like your company…”

“The wolf has been nudging you to look. The angel or whatever he is told you the devil is not as dark as he appears. What does that suggest to you?”

“That you aren’t my Virgil.” Will says, flicking the wilted lettuce from his sandwich around his plate.

“Neither are you Dante.” Daniel slides the plate out of Will’s reach.

“The angel…you… want me to see the good in Hannibal. I’m not seeing it.”

“Doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Find the good in him and find it in yourself. But why not just tell yourself that? Why the messenger?”

“Because I trust you to tell me the truth. Because I’m not really trusting myself right now. So even in my dreams, I need to hear it from someone else.”

“And that is why you came to me. To be your anchor. You are questioning a lot of things, about yourself, and that is a very scary place to be in.”

“Yeah. I’ve been there before.”

I know who I am…

“I don’t really want the drugs, Daniel.”

“I know. You have good reason to be afraid of those, too.”

“Can’t you um…regress me without them?”

“It wouldn’t be productive. I understand your reluctance after what you’ve been through. I’m not going to give you anything you’ve been given before. Your brain is already acclimated to them.”

“What kind of hallucinogens are you going to introduce? Or aren’t you going to tell me that, either?”

“I can’t. You anticipate too much as it is.”

“You aren’t going to tell me what you want me to remember, either.”

“I’m not going to ask you to remember events. I am going to ask you to create some. I’m going to ask you questions you will not ask yourself. To imagine what you want to happen because you won’t do it on your own. Will, if you can’t confront him in your dreams, you won’t be able to do it in person.”

“I won’t be able to navigate the hallucinogens. You are throwing me unknowns.”

"Yes. It's going to get uncomfortable. And I'm going to see it. You are protecting me, I get that. But I can't help if you keep me out."

"When did you want to do this?"

"I was planning on today, but uh, circumstances have given you a reprieve. I am not up to it today. I need a clear head to deal with you."

"What I would like is to see where I go when I black out. Wherever that place is with the odd wallpaper."

"Anything is possible, I guess. It will depend on what you remember and think about when I prompt you during the therapy."

"Maybe you should prompt that perfume I smell sometimes."

"Perfume?"

"Yeah. A woman's fragrance. I smelled it at your office, at my palazzo, and here a couple times."

"You associate the perfume with the blackouts? Why didn't you mention this when it happened?"

"I'm not sure it is associated with the blackouts. I haven't smelled it in a while. But it wasn't Alia and it wasn't any of your staff. I have smelled it before and I can't place it."

"Will, your conscious mind is connected to your subconscious in ways I don't understand. Associations come quickly, but randomly for you right now. Your dreams play out in your mind to a point, but you wake yourself up. You won't go any further. The hallucinogens will ensure that you do. That you don't block. I will be there to supervise, to be who you need me to be. You really need to do this Will, and I understand your reluctance to take the drugs, I really do. I wouldn't ask unless I thought it was necessary. And if you don't want to, we won't. Your call."

"You won't slip me anything for my own good?"

"Not without your permission. Never."

Will looks hard at Daniel for nearly a minute as his mind cranks out possible permutations of probable outcomes. At the very least, he will get a huge dose of honesty from himself. At the very worst, Daniel will finally see him for the wreck he truly is. Then again, Daniel seems to know more than Will gives him credit for.

Will concludes it all comes down to trust. He has allowed Hannibal to call the shots long enough. Daniel deserves his turn at bat. Maybe he will hit a homerun. At least something will get on the scoreboard. Will hasn't put any points up.

"Okay. When?"

"Soon. I don't want to give you too much notice."

Daniel does not intend to give Will any notice. Any advance preparation on Will's part will undermine the therapy and Daniel has waited far too long for Will's approval. If Will knew what he had planned, he would have never agreed to it. He does have one question that has been nagging at him for a while. Since Will has pretty much abandoned his hunt for the time being, Daniel thinks he should inquire and see what falls out. Before the hypnotherapy.

“Will…” he says, still editing his words as he speaks, “it has occurred to you that you wouldn’t need to hunt Lecter if you drew him out, right?”

“Draw him out how?”

Will’s tone is almost conversational but Daniel feels the prickle of agitation from him, like needles along his skin. Daniel watches Will consider his question.

“Like take out a personal ad? Let’s meet at a neutral location?” Will grins despite how unsettled he feels.

“No…I was thinking something more his style, something more…grandiose.”

“Like a murder tableau?” Will says quietly, actually impressed that Daniel would even submit such a sordid suggestion to him.

“I’m sure the thought crossed your mind.”

Will decides to give Daniel an honest answer. Daniel is getting better at thinking like him. Will doesn’t know how he feels about that.

“A grandiose invitation like that would also draw out law enforcement on an international scale. I’m pretty sure I would be escorted not too politely out of the country.”

“But you thought about it.”

“I…considered it, yes.”

“And you dismissed the idea because it wouldn’t have been effective. Because you couldn’t control the outcome.”

“Pretty much.” Will says knowing Daniel will chew on that for a while.

Will meets Daniel’s eyes without blinking looking every bit the killer Daniel knows he can be.

Will begins to pick up their plates and clear the table when Daniel doesn’t respond. He sets the dirty dishes in the sink and begins to wash and dry, methodical and quiet as he stares out the window over the sink. He feels Daniel’s eyes at his back.

Better the devil you know.

Daniel feels like he is watching Lecter’s prized predator pace around his kitchen pretending to be domesticated, perpetrating a pantomime of epic proportion.

Daniel has invited a fledgling serial killer into his home and is intending to feed him hallucinogens so they can engage in guided hypnotic therapy in the hopes of helping the killer standing over his sink to accept his nature and climb out of his fiery inferno.

Daniel does not think; he knows he must be crazy. As crazy as Will.

Will’s crazy is contagious. Daniel wants to think that Will would never hurt him, that the bond they share shelters him somehow. Will likely thought the same thing about Lecter. Daniel swallows the lump in his throat and walks to stand beside Will. His patient. The demonic angel who shares his bed. The angelic demon who shared Lecter’s. He collects the dried dishes and begins to put them back in the cabinet as another Vivaldi concerto queues up.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up:
Hannibal prepares one his favorites for Daniel unfortunately at the twins' expense, calls Roberta for a favor, and ponders some memories of the mongoose he left in his kitchen.

And shortly thereafter: Hannibal has his next session with Daniel, he locates Will, and can't help but send Will an invitation in his own grand style.

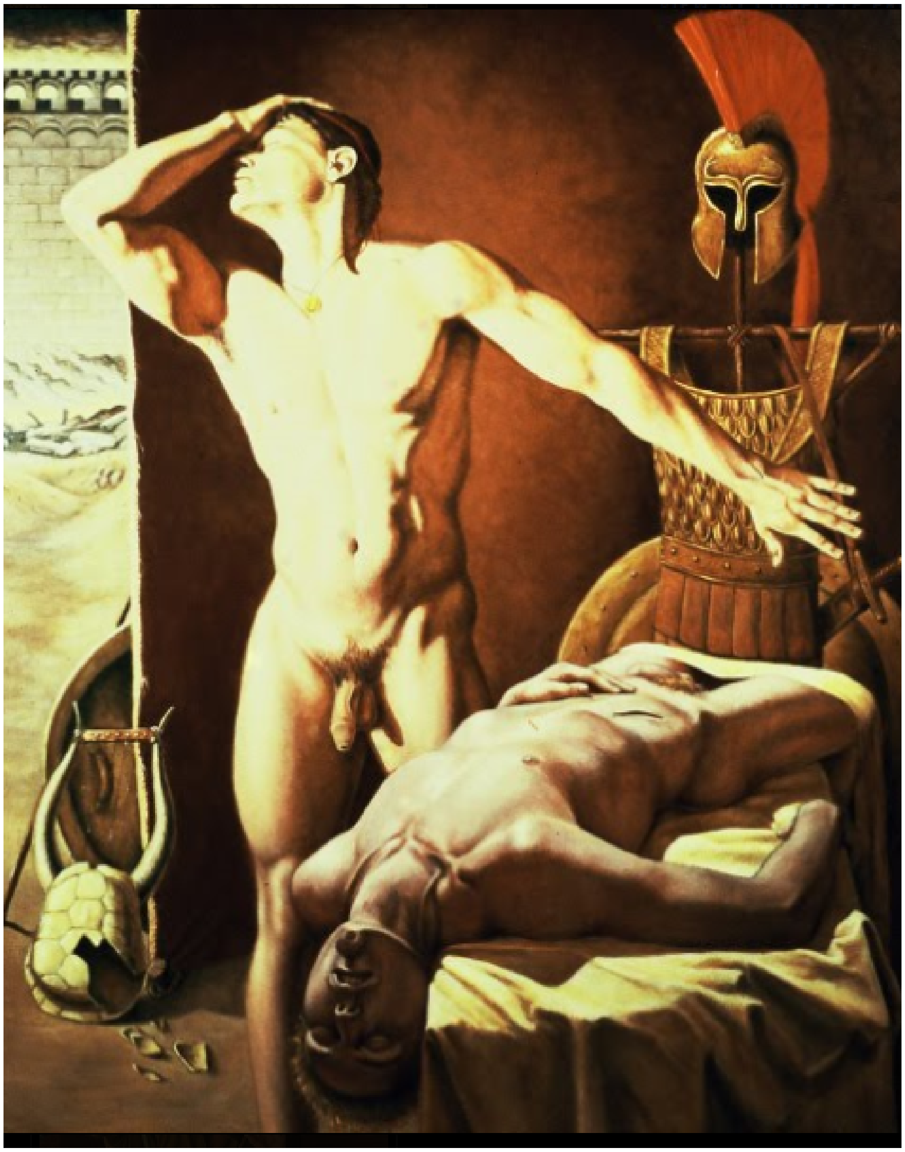
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

> Daniel has a eureka moment with Will. Hannibal makes the twins pay for their supper, chats with Roberta, and ponders some memories of the mongoose he left in his kitchen.
>
> Hannibal hums to the melody of the sweeping sonata until he gets to the passage Will always had trouble playing. The tempo shift from first to second movement never failed to trip him up. Hannibal had suggested he was manifesting a resistance to transitions. Will had countered that perhaps Hannibal shouldn't keep time with his hands between Will's legs.
>
> Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata had also been one of the selections playing during a divinely delectable dinner with Alana and Will. Hannibal had been unable to decide which had been more sublime, his entrée or the cloaked exchanges of insinuation around the table. The three of them had dined on Mason's gift of a fresh hog together. Alana could not have conceived the consequences of relating her conversation with one Freddie Lounds that evening.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



Death of Patroclus, Eric Rutledge

Chapter 52

Daniel has a eureka moment with Will. Hannibal makes the twins pay for their supper, chats with Roberta, and ponders some memories of the mongoose he left in his kitchen.

Daniel feels like he is on autopilot as he puts the last of the dishes in the polished oak cabinet. He feels dazed with emotions that spin within like a whirlwind tugging at bones and breath. He stares at the brass handle on the cabinet trying to separate his emotions from Will's. He knows the killer lurks in Will, he does not usually see it as he did just now. As he stands with hands flat on the white Formica countertop, Daniel considers the pacing predator at his back. Will is restless. If he has already dismissed the idea of committing murder to draw Lecter out into the open, then he must be anticipating something else. Daniel contemplates what that might be.

Will could resort to killing and arranging a tableau for Lecter if he was desperate enough, but Daniel does not think he is. Not yet. Will could take a life, could take pleasure in it, could even rationalize it if he thought doing so would snare Lecter, but to Will's thinking, the sacrifice would have to be a worthy one. Every life lost in the pursuit of Lecter has cost him emotionally. To kill in order to catch would bring Will closer to becoming what he fears. Will cannot take the moral high ground if his actions betray his beliefs.

That does, of course, assume Daniel's beliefs about Will are accurate. His gut tells him that he is. Until Daniel learns otherwise, Daniel decides to trust his gut. As conflicted as Will is, Daniel does not believe it is in him to send Lecter an invitation written in blood.

Will has not exhausted every avenue available to him and if his dreams and hallucinations are any indication, he is not ready to confront Lecter. He is in no rush for that confrontation as long as he spins in his inferno. Something else clouds the blue eyes that turned away from him to seek refuge in dirty dishes.

Will is keeping something from him. An anxious kind of anticipation has bloomed since Daniel asked about drawing Lecter out. Perhaps something has developed that Will doesn't want to talk about. Unfortunately, Will not wanting to talk wouldn't be anything new. But something is causing the edginess that coils throughout Will's limbs, drawing out the predator in him.

His dreams have changed. Dreams are conceived out of memory and emotion. Will's inferno is also shaped by his emotional response to his waking world. Something has caused Will to include his therapist in his inferno. Daniel knows he has made appearances in Will's dreams, but not recognizably in his inferno. As far as Daniel can tell, his likeness in Will's inferno represents Will's better self, the part of him he wants to protect and the part of him that he trusts.

What could arouse that degree of anxiety in Will? Will, who is well acquainted with stress and ugliness.

A threat. What else could explain the thinly veiled aggression that assails Will from within and feels to Daniel as visceral as hairs rising along his neck. He turns from the cabinets to find Will gazing at him from the other side of the kitchen.

Will has turned around from the sink and is watching him closely; his eyes wander over Daniel's body like he is taking inventory. Daniel thinks perhaps he is. He realizes Will is profiling him, taking into account every physical aspect of his being in an effort to imagine Daniel's thoughts. There is an easier way.

"You could just ask me, Will." Daniel says as Will's eyes alight on his face.

"Ask you what?"

"Whatever it is you think you can't. While you are at it, you can tell me what you are holding back."

Will draws on his lower lip, looks aside and rubs at his neck, fingers lifting damp hair from his skin. Daniel is usually assessing Will's state of mind. Realizing Will is assessing his must be a tad bit unsettling for a psychiatrist. Looking at Daniel so intently is a little unsettling for Will. The duel edged sword of intimacy pricks at his heart and between his legs.

As Will tries to imagine Daniel's thoughts, images of lunging at him to grind him hard against the counter and rip the thin tee from those well-muscled shoulders come unfiltered and raw. Will can almost feel the luscious ripple that sucking on Daniel's tongue sends the length of his body, setting his nerves to tingling. He longs to sink into the blissful oblivion Daniel offers, just for a little while. He suspects Daniel wouldn't mind. A little physical reassurance that Will has not completely flipped his lid would likely be well received. Will knows what makes Daniel tingle, too.

Daniel knows all about his dreams now where he had only snatches before. He has a frame of reference for the emotions he experiences while Will approximates slumber beside him at night or sits slumped on his couch, lost in a hallucination. Will does not know what it would feel like to not fear his dreams. He wonders what it would be like to not fear what awaits him when he wakes from them. What it would be like to not mingle dreams with waking life.

The nightmares continue to follow him out of his dreams. His dreams have been intruding upon his waking life for a long time. He has not allowed anyone to share in those intrusions since…

Do you feel alive, Will?

I…I feel like I'm fading.

Have you experienced any further loss of time? Or hallucinations?

The memories of his conversations with Hannibal throb with a life of their own in his consciousness. They tug. They hurt. They torture. He misses them. He hates that he misses them.

You sit in that chair, Will, as you have so many times before. It holds among its molecules the vibrations of all our conversations ever held in its presence.

Will pushes off from the sink and walks to share the counter next to Daniel. Daniel's hands are splayed along its edges, fingers poised and tremulous. His feet are placed apart in front as he rests half sitting and half leaning, the posture reminiscent of the way he used to take up beside Hannibal at his antique teak desk. He feels Daniel's head nudge his shoulder.

Will nudges him back.

*"*I don't want to ask you anything, Daniel. I just wanted to gage…where you're at. With me."

"I know who you are, Will. You're deciding whether to tell me something, or not?""

"You just had to ask about drawing Hannibal out."

"I like to confirm whether or not I'm right about something. Don't you?"

"Is it uncomfortable for you to think like me? Because you are getting pretty good at it."

"I should be way more uncomfortable than I am. In for a penny, in for a pound."

"I know you think you know what that means, but you don't."

Will sighs into Daniel's hair, and reaches across his chest to massage the soft curls that rest on his shoulder as he thinks how much Daniel has partaken of his banquet of crazy. Daniel is well past the appetizers at this point. Will does not think Daniel will be surprised as much as worried by what he has to tell him. And he should be worried. Any sane person would be.

Will's thoughts have been consumed with the Paolini twins for days. He has not heard from them in almost a week and he can no longer attribute their lack of contact to their vices. Considering where he sent them and who they were looking for, he can only imagine one reason for their disappearance. The primary reason he sent them. The satisfaction spreads warm across his lips.

Will is a good fisherman. One simply needs the right bait.

He looks down at Daniel, dark curls and warm breath on his shoulder. Ever the calm mist upon his turbulent sea. Daniel remains his anchor despite his glimpses into Will's well of depravity and darkness. And Will is grateful to feel the weight of that anchor beside him. Will does not require empathy to know he frightens Daniel. Will had been frightened of Hannibal, too, and that had not stopped him.

This is Daniel's Gestalt at work; facing his own fears as he helps Will deal with his. Will thinks this dynamic between them the most focused awareness he has ever experienced. He can only imagine what insight will surface from the hypnotherapy. Daniel is proving to be a most unconventional psychiatrist after all.

The proposed therapy will force Will to step out of his recent past so that he can slip off the regret and wishful thinking like old shoes. Daniel wants him to shake off the residue and see Lecter and himself with fresh eyes. Will needs to attempt this sooner rather than later with the twins missing in action. Daniel has been correct about many things. Will has been looking for Hannibal in the physical world when he should have been searching his inner landscape all along. Daniel has been the intrepid explorer in the rugged and ruined terrain of Will's mind.

Daniel is extremely perceptive. Will thinks there is nothing that Daniel is not capable of figuring out, given enough time. His empathy allows him to understand Will quite well, so well, that Daniel is likely becoming shocked at his own associations. Will reminds himself he knew Daniel would be affected. It was only a matter of time.

He is firmly in Will's mindset now as their conversation this afternoon proved without a doubt. While Will struggles within the inferno of his dreams, adapting to the associations and impulses that tear at his mind, Daniel is struggling to adapt, too. Daniel has adapted enough to be able to think like Will. He already feels everything Will does and has been gradually connecting emotions to thoughts.

Will knows his association with Daniel is changing him.

Who you were yesterday is laid waste to give rise to who you are today.

How many lies have had to be sanctified? How many consciences devastated?

Daniel's conscience remains intact, though he has made many concessions for Will. Daniel seems to have accepted his concessions as collateral damage, weighing his needs against Will's and finding the scales tipped in Will's favor. Daniel's feelings for him run deep and Will is aware that Daniel's empathy is another of those two edged swords Will has a habit of picking up. It is a sword Daniel will find very sharp if its blade finds him.

Will knew he would not be able to protect Daniel from the dark clouds, but the knowing does not make it any easier to accept. Daniel's gentle mist hovers still, but Will doesn't know for how long.

He has kept Daniel out of his hunt for Hannibal as much as possible, exposing him to fragments of information in the hopes of keeping him safe and far from the fallout that will surely come now that Will is certain the lures he threw out have at last attracted their mark. Will has caught no mere fish; he has attracted a shark with an offering flesh and blood. The shark will want more.

Daniel is unaware of the game Will plays with the Sardinian twins, Mason, and Hannibal. He is somewhat aware of Will's status with the FBI, but Will has not explained that situation in any detail either. Jack will not leave messages much longer and he should probably talk to Jack before the imminent shit storm breaks once Hannibal makes a meal out of the twins.

Jack will do what Jack wants. He will consider what Will tells him, but the trust between them will never be what it was. Jack still needs Will's imagination. Jack prefers to keep his tarnished and broken pony close to the stables these days. Will is in Florence conditionally. If he does not call Jack, he forfeits those conditions. And Will will become the hunted as well.

Will rubs at his face as he stares at the ceiling. He has to tell Daniel about all the little games before something happens. Will knows very well now how actions can be misinterpreted and intentions rendered meaningless.

"You know" Daniel says suddenly, lifting his head a little. "I had the weirdest dream last night. It's the only dream I remember."

"A drunken dream? Are you sure you want to share?" Will says into the curls on his shoulder.

"I think a little role reversal could be therapeutic."

Daniel yawns. Thinking about his dream has him thinking of his bed upstairs and how good it would feel to sink into it right now. How good it would feel if Will were to sink into it with him. Will can indulge his predator instincts there as much as he likes…

"For me? Or, for you?" Will says.

"Maybe cathartic is a better word. Confession is good for the soul, huh Will?"

"Depends on the soul. What did you dream?"

"I was fishing of all things. I have never dreamed about fishing in my life, but there I was in this stream like we fished in the Tevere and I'm throwing in my lure, a little feathered thing with a hook. I'm not really paying attention to it after I throw it in the water. I'm looking around, seeing rocks, trees, the banks of the river… And then the feathers on the lure start getting really big, like coming out of the water big, like Jaws. I'm thinking I'm not going to catch any fish with a big huge lure like that and then I start getting angry and frustrated because the lure is not only big it's heavy and hard to manage. Finally, the lure is so large it flies right off the fishing line. And it flies in slow motion so I can see it is an eagle."

"Sounds like something I would dream." Will says, not looking at Daniel, eyes focused on the ceiling.

"I think so, too. Any idea why I might dream about fishing and eagles?"

“Sounds like you have an idea.”

“I’d still like to know what you think. Apply yourself to my perspective and indulge me.”

Will can almost feel him grinning wickedly beside him. Daniel had likely been reflecting on recent conversations while falling asleep. He had absorbed all the imagery from Will’s dreams and his own subconscious had created a dreamscape fueled by his emotions and Will’s.

“See what happens when you sleep with your crazy patient?” Will says.

“It is a hazard of the job, one I have been well compensated for.”

Daniel nudges Will’s ear with his nose and Will feels the smile spreading across his lips despite himself. How typical of Daniel to draw him with honey rather than vinegar.

Will sighs as Daniel’s lips brush across his throat. “I think you spend way too much time in my head. That was me in the stream, not you. You think I am already fishing for him, already thrown out the bait. Our conversation this afternoon has confirmed that for you.”

Will pauses and thinks that Daniel might be more attuned to Will than he is aware. If he dreamed this dream last night, even before hearing Will’s latest revelations today, even while being someplace else and fairly occupied, Daniel has absorbed quite a lot. Will wonders what else he has collected unconsciously.

“Your mind is too quick for your own good. What else are you thinking?”

Daniel rolls his head along Will’s shoulder, inhaling the scent of his shirt and his hair. He stares through the window over the sink into the yard as ideas about Will’s motivations form on his lips.

“There are other reasons for not making your own…tableau. Law enforcement would be a deterrent, but I am sure you are as capable as Lecter of leaving no evidence. You were not prepared to sacrifice some random Italian to attract Lecter. It would have to be somebody who, at least to your thinking, deserved to be the bacon so to speak. So, you figured another way to lure him out.”

Will grins into the curls at his cheek. “So far, so good.”

“You sent the twins on a wild goose chase a couple weeks ago hoping that their digging would turn up something to grab his attention and provoke him. Lecter would connect the dots to Verger, then to you. You’re…manipulating Lecter ”

“I’m trying and it wasn’t a wild goose chase. If someone goes poking around in your old neighborhood, chances are somebody still lives there who knew you. Might even get word to you that people were nosing around. There was nothing going on here and Alia had phoned to tell me that the twins were under scrutiny and if I didn’t want to be traced to them that I should get them to lay low for a while. They had been spending too much time around the precinct, I guess, and somebody noticed.”

Will knows now it was only Alia who had noticed, but it doesn’t matter at this point. What does matter is that she has kept her conversations with Will to herself.

“If Lecter connects them to you, he will kill them. He’ll want you to know he found them. You want him to make the tableau; to reveal himself.”

"He will kill them just for snooping. He will find them insufferably rude. The connection to Mason is icing on the cake. The connection to me…well, I don't know how that will be received. I hoped they would poke around in a sensitive spot and it looks like they have. Hannibal will be curious that I am working with Mason."

Will has no doubt that Luciano will give him up. Hannibal will pull Luciano's strings like a puppeteer and Luciano will dance until the strings are cut. Luciano will repeat every word Will ever said to him and Hannibal's mind will turn. Hannibal will see through the deception in the lies and feel right at home. He will play killer to Will's profiler once again and lace his tableau with misdirection, knowing only Will will see it.

"I think he will feel other things besides curiosity." Daniel says.

Will picks up on the concern in Daniel's voice. His concern is well-placed. Hannibal's emotions are nothing to be trifled with.

"Whatever he learns from the twins will bring all his emotions into focus. He is methodical. He will seek more information.

"You are sacrificing the twins to catch him, Will. But you know that. You want them dead?"

"They plan on killing me and Hannibal."

"They want to kill you? I thought they work for you."

"They work for Mason. Mason wants to kill me almost as much as he wants to kill Hannibal. We are, each of us, a means to an end."

"So instead of you killing the twins…"

"I let Hannibal do it for me. He kills the twins and my hands are clean. Of course, when he does, it will bring Mason, the police, Interpol, and Jack a-running. If I send Hannibal a love letter using the twins, I am compromised. I will be asked to consult on any criminal investigation that ensues and I will be suspect regardless given my history."

"He is much more likely to make the connection to Mason, and you, if he finds them alive rather than hearing about it on the news, if you had killed them."

"Exactly. A news report would sensationalize the gore, but I think the Italian press would protect one its business leaders. Interpol would control the flow of information. And I would be lucky to remain in country."

"Why? How would they tell the difference between your work and Lecter's?"

"They wouldn't. But they when bodies show up like that, they will investigate me. I would have no alibi if I killed them. I wouldn't be able to account for my time. And doing that takes…a lot of time. Unless I asked you to lie for me and I'm not going to put you in that position. This way, like I said, I am clean and once they clear me of whatever Hannibal has served up, I will be asked to consult and catch…again."

"But Will, wouldn't Lecter be thrilled at the thought of you creating a tableau just for him? He would jump on that…"

"Which is why I considered the twins as…art. But once I did, that is the extent of their usefulness. I would have Mason, their family, and the authorities after me, including Jack. And…Hannibal might not have responded. While he would have been moved by the sentiment, he wouldn't trust it."

"But, if he stumbles upon the hired help…"

"Then he will want to draw me out, to see where I stand…this time. Either way, Hannibal will likely conclude I am again colluding with the FBI. He may, or he may not, reach out to me. I think he will."

"He hasn't reached out to you in a year, Will. No matter where he is on the planet, all he had to do was start leaving bodies. You were wondering why he hasn't. You are forcing his hand."

Will knows Hannibal will consider every possible angle with painstaking thoroughness. Will is confident Hannibal will take into account his limitations and resources. Knowing Will is in Florence searching for him with Verger money and apparent FBI backing will bring Hannibal out of his retirement. His curiosity is his whimsy and Will is his muse.

"As he has forced mine on many occasions. I continue to posit his intentions in that regard. We sort of left things…unresolved."

Daniel smiles at Will's unfailing gift for understatement. If Lecter has the twins he will learn Will is working with them. How long before Hannibal figures out where Will is?

"When you sent the twins to Lithuania, you were still living at the palazzo. You're here, now."

"I know. We have time. Hannibal doesn't know where I am. That complicates things for Hannibal. The twins can't tell him where I am because they don't know about the palazzo and I never told them. They were in France. They are either still in France which would mean so is Hannibal, or they made it back to Italy."

"Which would mean he is here, has been all along. Laying low and waiting for you?"

"Waiting for something. Like you said, he's had a year to drop bodies. If he has the twins, and I believe he does, then it won't be long before I am investigating a crime scene. It is his nature. Even though he will know I am expecting it, he will oblige. He won't be able to resist."

To the truth then, and all its consequences…

"He will do it knowing Florence will be crawling with law enforcement. A manhunt of epic proportion."

"He likes epic. He thrives on it. He exists there."

"Achilles battles Troy again."

"And he will want his Patroclus at his side."

"Yeah, and he'll come looking for him…"

"Daniel, except for you and Alia, no one knows I am here."

“Chilton does.”

“Hannibal will not be talking to Chilton, although…Jack might. Damn. Well, Hannibal will only know as much about me as I know about him. We are both in Florence. That’s it.”

“You might have said something to me sooner. No wonder your dreams have kicked into high gear with all that anxiety. Jesus Fucking Christ, Will.”

“Christ has nothing to do with it. The less you know the better. I told you I don’t want you involved in this anymore than you already are.”

“You are living with me, in my house. I am already involved.”

“You are as involved as you need to be. I need you as my anchor, so you can hang up your cape before you even put it on.”

Daniel sighs. Arguing with Will now will get him nowhere. Daniel decides to focus on what Will needs at the moment, and perhaps the rest will take care of itself. He hopes so before it becomes open season.

“It is even more important that you face your fears, Will. You are running out of time.”

“I know.”

“And Will…”

“Yes?”

“You’ve just unleashed another inferno”

Will is quiet as he coils thick curls around his fingers. Will has unleashed not the *Inferno*, but the prospect of a resurrected *Iliad.* He is counting on Hannibal wanting to rewrite this one, too.

The Tuscan sun sinks in the west outside; the hazy coral sky grows dark as Hannibal descends into the basement, but the Paolini twins wouldn’t know that. They see only what Hannibal wants them to see within the confines of the sound proofed room. Hannibal thinks it remotely sad that neither of them will ever see another sunset. He thinks it more tragic that watching the sun make its glorious ascent or watching it plunge into the horizon is a pleasure they likely never appreciate except accidentally should they glance up as they stumble from a bar...or a barn.

He has learned a lot about the twins during their sojourn here. They were bred to violence much like the pigs their family raises. Reared in an atmosphere of brutality and expected to carry out the family business with cold efficiency. They are dismissive of their cultural heritage and oblivious to their ignorance. Desensitized to the suffering of anyone outside of their family, but curiously ill equipped to endure any offense to their own. Luciano could break bones or slice off limbs all day, but touch a hair on his sister’s head and he loses all sense of detachment. Hannibal imagines Lucia quite the accomplished seductress, in her own way of course, and just as capable as her brother of slitting a man’s throat while she straddles him, cock between her legs and knife between her teeth.

But there is no art to their killing. No poetry. Their misguided vendetta has placed them on the wrong side of vengeance. For what they would do to him, to Will, they will experience the poetry of life and death first hand. But until then, Hannibal must keep them motivated and alive.

He opens the heavy solid oak door that leads to what constitutes a workshop here beneath his villa and greets the surly twins with a tray containing their dinner. The meal is for Luciano. Lucia will have to forego her dinner this evening. No food before surgery. But Luciano needs his vitamins and his medication.

“What is this?” Luciano asks, wrinkling his nose.

“The usual. Protein and carbohydrates to last you a while.”

Hannibal snaps a napkin in the air, arranges it next to the plate. He checks the bindings at Luciano’s wrists and satisfied they are secure and not too uncomfortable, moves to inspect the sister.

Luciano groans as he sits up from the mattress on the floor and jerks at the heavy chain that wraps around his ankle and binds him to the sturdy metal anchor point protruding from the cement and tile floor. For all his talk of manners, this Lecter treats Luciano and his sister like livestock. He makes references to the pigs his family raises for Mister Verger. He thinks Luciano does not notice his little pig puns, but he does not give the pompous Lecter any satisfaction.

Luciano will have his satisfaction when his family finds him and his sister. They are searching for them now. This Lecter has no idea how resourceful his family is; how many palms are kept greased throughout Italy. It is only a matter of time before Mister Verger throws his own money into the search. Verger wants the information they have dug up on this Hannibal Lecter and it must be worth a lot for Lecter to hold them hostage over it.

Mister Graham may also be looking for them. He seems to want the information as badly as Verger. If anyone can find them, it would be Graham. He is an odd person with odd solitary habits, but he is very clever. Luciano thinks that if Graham sees the footage from the airport parking lot, he will figure out it was Lecter who forced them into his car. He will track Lecter down. That is what Verger hired him to do. Graham seems very much to want to catch Lecter.

Luciano knows what vengeance looks like on a man. Will Graham is a man with an ax to grind; a pretty big one if he has chased Lecter all the way from Baltimore. Too bad that Luciano can’t let him bury his ax in Lecter’s head. Mister Verger has plans for Lecter. And, apparently Graham as well.

Once Graham finds Lecter, he and Lucia have to do what they were hired to do. It is none of his business, but Luciano has wondered what the mild Graham did for Verger to want to kill him as well as Lecter. He had asked Verger only once to explain the reason for his elaborate charade on Graham. Verger had replied that he was not paying Luciano and his sister to think. He said only that Graham was as crazy as Lecter, but Luciano does not see it.

Luciano can believe Lecter is crazy. He already thinks Mason Verger is crazy. Graham seems to be the least crazy and Luciano thinks the only thing that qualifies Graham as crazy is his apparent association with Lecter and Verger. Luciano cannot wrap his mind around the relationship between the three men. He does not have to. It is business.

Luciano thinks this Lecter quite capable of injuring Verger, but no so much Graham. From what he understands, Verger is confined to a wheel chair and his face was ripped off. Yes, he can see Lecter doing that. Luciano supposes he will never know what part Graham played. It is not his concern.

Ensuring that both Graham and Lecter are securely incapacitated is what he has been hired to do. Graham has to die for whatever his offense to Verger, but Luciano has no quarrel with him. Luciano won't enjoy what he has to do to Graham, but it is nothing personal. He will enjoy seeing Lecter get his due. Luciano will enjoy that a lot. But until then, he must behave to give Graham or his family time to find him and Lucia. As the time has passed, Luciano does not care who finds them first.

He takes a whiff of the plate Hannibal slides beneath his nose and salivates. The aroma of aged provolone and crisp seasoned sausage fills his nostrils. Luciano has to admit this *figlio di puttana* does know how to cook, though Luciano is getting tired of breakfast food.

This Lecter fellow is a bit more complicated than Mister Verger made him out to be. He is educated, that much is clear. And he is strong, uncannily strong. The clothes he wears hide a muscular body more toned and fit than his own. Luciano knows Lecter could easily snap his neck, but he is unfailingly polite, apologizing for each and every discomfort he delivers.

And unlike the annoying and long winded Verger, Lecter explains himself rather well despite referring to books and such that Luciano knows nothing about. He had actually found himself paying attention to one of Lecter's stories about Luciano's ancestors, a captain of the guard for one of the Medici. Luciano thinks that all things considered, being Lecter's hostage isn't so bad.

Luciano would like to know what Lecter is keeping him and his sister around for.

It has something to do with Graham, but Luciano is completely stumped. The relationship between the three men is convoluted enough, but there is clearly something going on that has nothing to do with Verger. Graham seems to despise Lecter. Lecter sends mixed signals where Graham is concerned. Luciano isn't sure if he wants to kill him, eat him, or fuck him. Luciano shrugs. Maybe all three.

Lecter is one crazy *figlio di puttana.* The papers say he is a cannibal. He is wanted by the FBI for killing a lot of people. Graham had told him that Lecter was civilized evil. Luciano cannot imagine what that even means. He thinks perhaps Lecter ate Verger's face off. Luciano cannot understand what would make a person want to eat people. He reminds himself he is not paid enough to fathom the game being played between the cannibal, the paraplegic, and the profiler.

He shakes his head as he watches the unassuming muscular man dressed in blue twill trousers and Polo shirt fussing with his surgical instruments across the room. He looks like a doctor, a teacher perhaps. He does not look like a murderer. Or a cannibal.

Luciano has cultivated his intimidating appearance. He looks dangerous. This man does not. Yet, Luciano feels terror so cold when Lecter looks at him sometimes he has almost pissed himself. Lucia is terrified of him. And Luciano has seen Lucia kill a man. She is no delicate flower yet she trembles before this man.

He looks back to the plate of scrambled eggs, sausage, and buttered chunks of toast. Lecter won't let them use utensils. He won't even untie their hands. They have to eat from the plate bent over on their knees, licking the plates with their mouths. At first, Luciano had refused, but his stomach had quickly disagreed with that decision. As Luciano sucks up the delicious breakfast, he notices his sister is watching him eat. She has no plate of eggs and sausage setting on her mattress.

Luciano looks into Lucia's face. She looks like she is about to cry. Her eyes are watery and her little chin quivers beneath tight lips. They haven't eaten since afternoon yesterday and Lucia usually eats more often than her brother. She is a snacker. But, there are no snacks from Lecter. Luciano thinks she has lost some weight since they have been here.

He tries to think how many days have passed. Luciano does not know if it is day or night right now.

“Signor Lecter…you did not bring a plate for Lucia?”

“No, not this time. I’m sorry Lucia.” Hannibal purses his lips and frowns in apology.

“Did I…did I do something wrong?” Lucia asks rather timidly.

Hannibal notes the attitudes of the twins have changed remarkably since he brought them down here. Defiance had quickly disintegrated into docility. Hannibal could put them on leashes and walk them down the street if he wanted to. Of course the drugs help.

And a tray of surgical instruments can be a very strong incentive to behave.

“Of course you have.” Hannibal coos. “You are a very bad person. But, you did nothing to deprive you of breakfast, I assure you.”

“That makes no sense.” Lucia pouts as she flops back onto the mattress.

“It will.” Hannibal says simply.

Luciano looks from his sister to Hannibal and his temper begins that short trip from his brain to his mouth.

“Mannaggia. Why not make sense now? Did you run out of eggs?”

Hannibal raises his brows at the outburst. Both of the twins have been kept mildly sedated since arriving, and their fear has departed as a consequence. Of course Luciano is upset that Lucia has no breakfast. He feels guilty gulping down his own while she has nothing. Hannibal can remedy that disparity quickly enough.

He walks over to Luciano and whisks the half eaten plate of breakfast out from beneath his face. Luciano will have to do without the sedatives Hannibal mixes with their food this evening. Luciano should be more concerned about why his sister did not get her ration. Lucia is concerned. Hannibal sees her staring at the ceiling when she is not staring at her brother. The wheels turn slowly, but they are turning.

“Most thoughtless of me to serve you and not your sister. It will not happen again.” Hannibal says, holding the plate and thinking how he hates to waste his creations. Then again, feeding the twins is a bit like casting pearls before swine.

“Hey! We haven’t eaten for hours.”

“You will both be served next time, Luciano.”

Although your sister may not have the appetite for it.

Hannibal dumps the remains of the plate in the plastic lined trash can. All evidence of the twins’ stay here finds its way to his furnace or to the stone fireplace in the garden, for yard trimmings and leaves, of course.

"Maybe we could eat something besides what you make, eh? Nothing fussy…get some take out, some pizza maybe."

Hannibal's eyes narrow to slits. This grimy little Sardinian has a way of plucking Hannibal's nerves. Leave it to Mason to select hired help with mental handicaps. Will must have been tempted to take out Luciano himself.

Hannibal smiles indulgently at Luciano. "I never order take-out. But, if you and your sister would like pizza, I think good behavior could persuade me to indulge you. Perhaps slice a little of my homemade pepperoni on it? Meats are my specialty."

Luciano blinks and Hannibal waits for the neurons to fire in his dulled sedated brain. Luciano's eyes widen and Hannibal can almost hear his thoughts collide like the faded ding of an arcade game.

"Or perhaps we'll just stick to the sausage."

Hannibal watches Luciano's tongue wag helplessly from his open mouth. He turns to leave and walks up the steps to the sounds of Luciano retching up his breakfast. Hannibal wonders what Luciano thought he had been eating all this time. Ignorance is bliss; until it is not.

* * *

Hannibal prepares for Lucia's surgery upstairs where the twins cannot see. He will perform the surgery downstairs where there is a drain in the floor. There is no operating theater here in his villa and Hannibal will have to improvise. It will be a simple procedure, one he has performed many times, though not recently and not on a living person. The last time was…Miriam Lass.

He will have to sedate Luciano when he puts Lucia under. Luciano will be an intolerable distraction if he has to witness the amputation of his sister's arm. But, there is no other area at the villa where Hannibal can perform the surgery without inviting suspicion. This sort of activity requires discretion and seclusion.

Hannibal sees no reason to hunt fresh game when the domesticated variety downstairs will do just fine. The drugs should have passed from Lucia's system by now. Only Luciano has received his usual dose for the last two days. Lucia seems sedate enough without them. There will be traces of the powerful narcotic that puts her under, but the arm will not be attached that long.

Hannibal sighs as he lugs the cd player down to the guest room in the back of the basement where the twins recline on their mattresses. He misses his workshop in Baltimore. Everything perfectly in its place, tools, tables, and hoses at the ready. And the sound system was to die for.

He unlocks and opens the door, walks to the other side of the room ignoring the curious stares of the twins as they sit up to watch him. The villa is not equipped to handle the subterranean sound system he had before and Hannibal will have to make do with this portable stereo that plays three cd's at a time. He finds himself making do more often than he cares to.

He makes do with his position at the Uffizi that falls short of providing him with the intense social interaction and challenge of his former profession.

He makes do with Du Maurier's company and he makes do with the arrangement they have.

He makes do with this beautiful villa that approximates his beloved home in Baltimore.

He makes do with Doctor Clayton…

Perhaps soon that will change. When he finds Will, everything will change.

Lucia rests comfortably on the stainless steel table at the other side of the guest room. She looks peaceful despite the oxygen tubes taped to her nose and mouth and the I.V. in her arm. The arm that Lecter is not going to take.

An assortment of Beethoven's piano sonatas is queued up and Hannibal hums along to the melody as he positions Lucia where he needs her to be before turning his attentions to her brother. Unfortunately, Luciano is not soothed by the strains of Beethoven.

Hannibal picks up the syringe filled with a narcotic and crosses to Luciano whose face crumples in anguish at Hannibal's approach. With every step Hannibal takes, Luciano's breath becomes more ragged. Hannibal thinks he might hyperventilate. He'll be calm momentarily.

"What are you going to do to her?"

Luciano screams at Hannibal from his mattress as his head flops from side to side, eyelids fighting the sedative Hannibal injects into the vein that spurts blood from beneath Hannibal's gloved fingers. Hannibal has to struggle to get him still.

"I'm afraid you and your sister have eaten me out of house and home. I think it only appropriate that you replenish my stores."

"You…you're crazy! *Cristo Santo! Brutto figlio di puttana!"*

Luciano's words begin to slide off his tongue into incomprehensible dribble. He looks into Hannibal's face as Hannibal rubs gauze damp with rubbing alcohol over his skin before bandaging the wound where the needle sliced him. Hannibal had meant the injection to be practically painless, but Luciano had decided otherwise.

Hannibal strokes his fingers against his scalp, as Luciano's eyelids flutter and close.

"Luciano…I am not crazy. I am a psychopath. There is a difference."

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata fills the room while Hannibal works upon Lucia, body spread out on a stainless steel prep table, her brother unconscious and quiet on his mattress. She is numb and out like the proverbial light thanks to the narcotic cocktail of propofol and phentanyl Hannibal has administered. The I.V. drip will keep her sedated for hours.

Her shoulder and arm have already been prepped, skin bathed in alcohol and tourniquet firmly in place. It is a routine procedure and Hannibal can perform it almost from memory. He wields the scalpel with a practiced flair; he has missed the feel of slender sharp steel in his hand like this, of using it for its intended purpose instead of shaving wood and charcoal from his pencils. A scalpel is both instrument of creation and tool of destruction.

It is the embodiment of elegance and beauty Hannibal thinks as the blade slices into the flesh separating skin from muscle leaving enough for the flap of flesh he will wrap around the stump. He has decided to take the fleshy arm close to the shoulder. Lucia is pleasingly plump as the saying goes and the meat from elbow to shoulder should prove tender.

Hannibal hums to the melody of the sweeping sonata until he gets to the passage Will always had trouble playing. The tempo shift from first to second movement never failed to trip him up. Hannibal had suggested he was manifesting a resistance to transitions. Will had countered that perhaps Hannibal shouldn't keep time with his hands between Will's legs.

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata had also been one of the selections playing during a divinely delectable dinner with Alana and Will. Hannibal had been unable to decide which had been more sublime, his entrée or the cloaked exchanges of insinuation around the table. The three of them had dined on Mason's gift of a fresh hog together. Alana could not have conceived the consequences of relating her conversation with one Freddie Lounds that evening.

Freddie Lounds thinks the two of you are a paradox. She sees something no one else sees.

What's that?

That neither of you is the killer she's writing about, but together, you might be.

Hannibal had been enjoying the friction between Will and Alana even before Alana had disclosed her detailed discourse with Lounds with pointed perceptiveness. Alana had handled the awkward position Hannibal had placed her in with grace, the balancing act between current lover and rejected suitor had required tact. Alana's discomfiture had no doubt distracted her from noticing the silent signals that passed between Will and himself. Well, most of them.

Will's behavior had left Hannibal almost giddy with amusement. His expressions had vacillated between indignation and embarrassment; petulance and utter boredom. His comments had been delivered with his usual dry wit and complete lack of appropriateness. Hannibal had been delighted.

Hannibal isn't sure if it was the wine soaked conversation or the sexual innuendo that had sent Will nearly out of his seat more than once during the evening…

The sound of high-pitched whirring summons Hannibal from his memory palace. Lucia's eyelids do not even flicker as he guides the hand saw through her left arm. Amputations take a remarkably short amount of time to complete. Surgery is an art, and largely reliant upon intuition.

The saw glides smoothly through the bone and Lucia's arm is at last free. Hannibal checks her vitals and the various dials of the equipment hooked up to the sedated Sardinian. Blood pressure and oxygen remain at acceptable levels. I.V. drip perfect. What Hannibal takes from her will provide nourishment for another. Sometimes the Fates and the will of the gods align.

As he waits for the bleeding to stop so he can administer the sutures, Hannibal returns to his dining room in Baltimore where the wine had flowed from tapered bottles bearing French labels into tall stemmed glasses, staining lips and loosening tongues. Alana had sat to his left beneath the erotic Japanese prints Hannibal had hung just that afternoon especially for his guests, and Will had sat to his right beneath Boucher's *Leda and the Swan*. As if he could have sat anywhere more appropriate.

Will had noticed the new prints immediately and had graced Hannibal with his doleful eye roll once Hannibal had seated himself after seating the oblivious Alana. Hannibal thinks Alana must have been distracted that evening. For a psychiatrist, she had displayed a remarkable lack of curiosity in her surroundings. Then again, Hannibal had to consider who she was dining with. The prints on the wall could hardly compare to the beauty already seated at the table.

It's just hard to know where you are with each other.

We know where we are with each other. Shouldn't that be enough?

Better the devil you know.

Hannibal had sniffed the bouquet from his generous glass of wine, his eyes alighting on Will.

The barest wrinkle had tugged at his lips and he had quickly shifted his gaze from Hannibal to Alana.

"Better the devil you know than the one you don't?" Alana had said, sapphire eyes glistening playfully, determined to keep the topic lighthearted. "You imply another relationship could be worse?"

"I imply only that there is comfort in the familiar." Hannibal had said.

"Like the comfort of knowing you chose the lesser of two evils." Will had said, lifting his glass and staring into it as though there was something to contemplate at the bottom of the glass.

Hannibal had raised a brow at the subtle but pointed taunt. A double entendre that Alana had mistakenly assumed was directed solely at her. Alana had turned her head from Hannibal, lips parted as she had stared at Will from across the table.

"I'm not sure, Will, but I think you were making a joke just now." Alana had said, her words crisply spoken but blanketed with a quick smile.

"Was I?" Will had returned a smile just as quickly.

"Humor is often the first casualty after the third bottle of wine." Hannibal had said. "I'll clear our plates and if I could intrude upon you Alana, to assist with dessert?"

"Of course."

Alana had pressed an embroidered napkin to her lips and had shaken a finger at Will.

"No more wine for you." Alana had said, dropping her napkin to the table.

They had left Will stroking at stubble to either stare at or finish his wine. Alana's cheeks had flushed hot as they had entered the kitchen. She had imbibed a lot considering she preferred beer. Hannibal had supposed that Alana had been as eager as Will to self-medicate, to ease the tension between them. As it had happened, both of them had drunk themselves beyond the point of relaxation. Will had drank enough to become surly, an attitude requiring very little alcohol to make an appearance in Will, and Alana had drank enough to become emotionally impaired.

"You know I am trying to be the adult in there…" Alana had said, sipping on her wine as she had stood by the fridge watching Hannibal take out the tray containing their dessert her hand curling around his wrist.

“You have known him longer than I. You already know our dear Will is not the most socialized of people.”

“Hannibal, this dinner…was a lovely idea, and I know you mean well, but I think…”

Alana had looked aside, unsure of how to phrase the rest of her thought. Hannibal had relieved her of the burden of both thinking too much and of saying something she might regret.

“He needs to work through his feelings.”

“I feel the accusations. I see them in his eyes every time I look at him.” Alana had said. Her hand had recoiled as though bitten.

“They feel like accusations to you because that is how you interpret them. I think for Will, he struggles with accepting who he is after all that has happened to him. I invited him here tonight to help.”

“This is therapy?”

“When is Will not in therapy? He dines with two psychiatrists.”

“I thought he was dining with friends.”

“I prefer to think of my role as encompassing more than either therapist or friend. I think of our time together as an opportunity for Will. He is learning about himself.”

Alana had parted her ruby red lips to speak but had thought better of it, perhaps deferring to Hannibal’s professional expertise. She had watched Hannibal through half lidded eyes, taking sips of wine from the glass she stubbornly refused to part with. Hannibal had moved to the center island to add the finishing touches on their dessert enjoying the anticipation on Alana’s face as she had licked her lips.

“What is that?”

“Shhh. You’ll ruin the surprise.”

Hannibal had known she still had feelings for Will, kept them close to her heart, and told herself she had done them both a favor by not acting on their attraction to each other. Hannibal had known she told herself it was better for Will; but Alana had made the decision for Alana. Alana had wanted a relationship with an adult, with someone she admired, not pitied. Which was why she shared Hannibal’s bed, not Will’s.

They had rejoined Will in the dining room and had found him, not surprisingly, staring into his glass of wine, fingers absently playing along the stem. He had glanced up as they entered and had mustered a welcoming smile. Alana had nodded at him; likely hoping Will had no more darts to throw. One can always hope.

Alana had slid back into her seat, tucking a napkin over her snug skirt and folding her legs beneath her chair.

“This looks wonderful.” Alana had said, “So…what is this? And what is the red?” Alana had pointed to dark and earthy red layer at the top of her parfait glass.

“A triple chocolate mousse. Most indulgent. A layer of red velvet, dark chocolate, and milk chocolate. I trust neither of you are lactose intolerant? The red velvet was an experiment I hope pleases your palate.”

Will’s lips had tweaked with interest, tinged with suspicion. Alana’s lips had widened in a pleased smile.

“Red velvet is my favorite. How did you know?” Alana had gushed.

“I didn’t, but knowing that will make it taste all the sweeter.”

Hannibal had not missed the cold stare from Will. Hannibal had merely raised his brows.

“Please…dig in.” Hannibal had said, lifting his spoon.

Will had stared at the curled shavings of dark bittersweet chocolate and the dollop of fresh whipped cream setting atop the slender parfait glass Hannibal had placed it in front of him. His jaw had worked from side to side; almost mechanically as he had observed the three tiered dessert glasses Hannibal had served each of them.

Each parfait glass had contained three tiers of chocolate mousse, but the layers had been arranged differently for each of them, each layer representing one of them. The placement of the layers in each parfait had been an expression of their relationships with each other. Hannibal’s interpretation.

Alana’s parfait had been layered with milk chocolate on the bottom, dark in the middle and red on top. Hannibal’s had the dark chocolate in the middle, red on top and milk chocolate on the bottom. And Will’s parfait had been layered with the red at the bottom, then dark, and finishing with the milk chocolate on top.

It had not taken long for Will to assimilate the presentation before him and infer the intended correlations. His eyebrows had shot up and he had looked to Alana. He had relaxed back into his seat when it became apparent she had no interest in anyone’s parfait but her own. Will's droll expression had suggested he had not shared in Hannibal’s humor.

He had rolled his eyes at Hannibal before glancing at the Japanese prints above Alana’s head and finding the implied eroticism there no less provocative, had consigned himself to feigning something like polite interest. Hannibal had almost heard the silent sigh from him.

Will had set his wine glass aside along with whatever thoughts had been swirling in his head. He had fixated on his triple layered dessert, tongue testing lips as he had stared at temptation.

Alana had wasted no time picking up her spoon and taking up a scoop of the whipped dessert. A quiet moan had erupted, a decadent gasp as the taste had settled on her tongue to slide down her throat. Hannibal watched the rush of blood tinge that white throat and spread over cheeks, already hot from the wine. Alana had been glowing with warmth.

Will had sat enrapt as he had watched Alana take spoonful after spoonful into her mouth unaware of the two men watching her practically shudder with pleasure. Hannibal had been unable to hide his contentment. The swell of satisfaction bloomed beneath his waistcoat as he had watched her eat his carnal creation, the ingredients far more dark and earthy than the cocoa.

“Hannibal…this is exquisite. My god.”

Hannibal had slid a spoonful into his mouth and had silently agreed with her. Will had sat with spoon poised over his parfait, still watching Alana devour hers with marked enthusiasm. Catching Hannibal’s eyes, he had dipped his spoon and placed the cushion of cream and chocolate in his mouth drawing the spoon slowly from his lips. He had closed his eyes allowing the taste to tantalize his tongue.

Hannibal had watched with eyes riveted to the movement of his Adam’s apple as the mousse had slid sensuously down his throat. When Will eyes had opened, his pale blue gaze had found Hannibal’s satisfied smile waiting for him. Will had favored him with one of his wicked smiles and had slipped another, fuller spoonful into his mouth.

Another torturously slow swallow had followed, then the deliberate licking of red full lips as Will had stared at him full on, and Hannibal had wanted to drown in those pale blue pools. Will had once again nearly shattered Hannibal’s reserve with the mere act of watching him eat.

Both Alana and Will were beautiful people. Ever moved by beauty in all its forms, Hannibal could imagine their bodies entwined, naked and perspiring in verdant dew soaked grass. But it was not to be. In Hannibal’s Eden, the serpent had conspired to keep Adam and Eve apart. No tasting of forbidden fruit. Eve’s eyes had been opened enough already. She would have to be content with the serpent. God desired Adam for himself.

Hannibal had forced himself to tear his gaze from Will to grace Alana with his attentions. She had seemed unperturbed but her eyes had darted from Hannibal to Will and back again. It had seemed to Hannibal that Alana had better known the devil after that evening. Both of them.

“I’m tempted to ask if there was some significance to the dessert?” Alana had said.

Will had sat with elbows on table, chin resting on folded hands and brows arched above eyes widened in amusement.

“What significance do you see?” Hannibal had asked.

“Well, there’s three of us and three layers. Deliberate?”

“Unconsciously, perhaps. I had the time to make three layers.”

“And you layered them differently. On purpose?"

“A random arrangement, except that the one with red velvet on top was meant for you.”

“I wouldn’t read too much into it.” Will had said frowning at his half full parfait glass.

“Well, I found the presentation intriguing. And the chocolate is very intense, almost smoky. What am I tasting?”

Alana leaned into her nearly empty glass, had wrinkled her nose, as though she might be able to ferret out the elusive ingredients by smell.

“You know how reluctant I am to give up my kitchen secrets, Alana. I will tell you this. The smoky flavor you detected is from poblano pepper, just a touch.”

“And the color?” Will had asked all innocence. So infuriating…his Will.

“Food coloring, of course.”

Alana had dropped her spoon into her glass and leaned back in her chair, wiped her lips with her napkin and had watched Hannibal and Will finish off their parfaits a thoughtful look on her face. It had been coincidence that he and Will had both set down their spoons at the same time.

Moonlight Sonata had come around again and Will had taken that as his cue to dismiss himself from the table. He had pushed back his chair and stood without ceremony, shaken his head of dark curls and had offered his dinner partners a tired smile.

“Doctor Lecter…” He had nodded at Hannibal and then had nodded to Alana. “Goodnight, Alana.”

Straightforward, simple, and almost polite. Hannibal had noted that Alana had not tried to convince Will to remain longer, nor had she questioned why he had to leave suddenly.

“Goodnight, Will.” Alana had said. “Drive safely.”

Will had held up two fingers as he had made his exit from the dining room, not in farewell, but indicating Hannibal had the time it would take him to finish that much whiskey in the salon to dismiss Alana. If Alana remained when he had finished his drink, Will would have left by way of the kitchen door and driven back to Wolf Trap.

The habit of measuring time with fingers had started in Hannibal’s office shortly after Will had become his patient. Will had not used his words as much back then. They had quickly developed a short-hand of silent signals to communicate simple ideas. Their silent signals had been all the intimacy Will had been able to abide at the time.

Hannibal had understood the reason for the fingers this evening. While Will had been mildly piqued at the innuendo, his desire to remain had been rooted in something far more sinister and immediate. Hannibal had known the topic of Freddie Lounds had weighed heavily on his mind as it had Hannibal’s.

The decision had been an easy one. Alana had spent the last two nights rolling about his sheets and with Will waiting in the salon, there had been no contest.

“Alana?”

“Yes, Hannibal?”

“Did you drive or take a cab?”

“A cab. Why?”

“Why don’t you call for another. I’ve had a wonderful time. But it’s time to call it a night.”

Five minutes later, a horn had honked outside. As Hannibal had walked her to the front door she had turned to him and lifted her chin as dark silky tresses tumbled from narrow shoulders. Hannibal had leaned down to kiss her goodnight, the taste of wine and chocolate still warm on her lips. She had smiled up at him before finally crossing the threshold, purse swinging from her arm as her fur lined coat trailed behind her.

He had closed the door and had joined Will in the darkened salon. Will had been gazing out the window and Hannibal had reached for him, hands covering soft curls at the back of his neck to draw him close, to look into the eyes that had tantalized, teased, and tortured him all evening. To inhale the scent of his clothes, his skin, his hair. To brush his lips across his forehead. To hold what was his.

And as Will had folded into his embrace, Hannibal had seen Alana Bloom staring out the window of her cab, her eyes glued to the very window where he stood with Will and Hannibal had watched her mouth fall open as the cab had pulled away into the cold and cloudy night.

Hannibal glances down at Lucia and admires his sutures. Every doctor's sutures are unique, his own signature to his work. The seal around the opened flesh and severed bone is uniform and neat. Even though Lucia will not live long enough to appreciate the expert job Hannibal has performed, Hannibal has not been any less circumspect than if she had been an actual patient under his care.

Hannibal checks her vitals again and removes the tape and plastic from her nose and mouth. He adjusts the I.V. drip. He will have to monitor her closely, this table has no restraints and Hannibal can't have her waking up with a freshly bandaged wound like this only to have her thrash around and rip out every stitch he just put in.

He applies the bandages after selecting three more cd's to listen to while waiting for the twins to regain consciousness. Neither Luciano nor Lucia will be waking for a while. The anesthesia he gave Lucia will take nearly half an hour and Luciano will likely sleep longer than that. Hannibal is in no hurry for either of them to awaken.

The severed arm sticks out of the sink to drain, hand and fingers already pale from the loss of blood. Hannibal will get to sectioning it off later. The tender flesh will be fed into the meat grinder concealed beneath the brown plastic on the counter at the back of the room, far from the twins. The casings for sausage are already attached and the seasonings sit mixed beside the grinder.

In no time at all, Hannibal will have fresh sausage. He has another session with Doctor Clayton Wednesday morning and Hannibal would like to surprise him. He hopes Clayton will be punctual for this session so they have more time to enjoy breakfast. Hannibal is looking forward to a pleasant therapy session over hot Italian roast coffee, fresh squeezed orange juice, and Hannibal's own special protein scramble.

Clayton should have recovered from his encounter with Du Maurier by then. Like Will, Clayton is an intriguing mix of masculinity and beauty, an embodiment of the classical ideal. But more intriguing is his mind. Hannibal intends to investigate the beauty of Clayton's inner landscape over their intimate breakfast.

Unfortunately, Wednesday is three days away, and although thoughts of seeing Clayton again are gratifying, Hannibal reminds himself he has more immediate concerns.

As Hannibal thinks of his evening with Will after Alana's departure, he finds himself pulling out his phone and ascending the stairs for better reception. He has not thought about his conversation with Will that evening for a long time. He thinks revisiting that memory with a fresh perspective might reveal insight into Will's intentions now. Will's relationship with the FBI and with Jack had been strained since Will's incarceration. Their relationship had not improved afterward. The FBI had not welcomed him back and Will had not been especially effective at repairing his fractured connections.

Hannibal may not know where Will is at the moment physically, but he may be able to better ascertain where he is mentally with the right information. While the twins sleep and the music plays, Hannibal dials his cousin's number and hits send.

"Hello, Hannibal." The sound of Roberta's voice warms Hannibal immediately.

"Am I interrupting anything?" he asks.

"Nothing that holds a candle to a call from you. But I am not alone. Have your guests departed?"

"Not yet."

"Ah. Will they be departing soon?"

"That depends. I could let them go quietly or give them a big send off."

"Which do you prefer?"

"That also depends."

"A big send off will attract unwanted guests."

"And yet it may be the only way to send an invitation to a dear friend."

"Your friend is there?"

"He is. And working for Mason. My guests were assisting my friend."

"Sounds like he wants to find you after all. How does that make you feel?"

"Cautious. Before I send an invitation that will as you say attract uninvited guests to our reunion, I would like to know his situation with the FBI. I would like to know what the FBI is up to. I would like to know where he has been before arriving here."

"You may not like what I find out, Hannibal."

"I like not knowing even less."

"I will contact my friend on the Hill and we'll see what shakes out*, n'est ce pas?"*

"Merci, ma cherie. Jusqu'à la prochaine fois."

Hannibal clicks off the phone and returns to the basement. He begins the necessary task of cleaning up after the surgery. As Hannibal glances around his subterranean guest room he estimates he will have things tidy once again long before the twins wake up.

His chat with Roberta has lifted his spirits. Hannibal feels closer to finding Will. Will feels closer somehow. He thinks of that evening with Will after Alana had left in her cab. As his mind retreats into his memory palace where Will is as yet untouched by Hannibal's blade, unblemished by the tarnish of betrayal, Hannibal reminds himself the Will he is destined to meet again is not the Will in his memory.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next: Hannibal remembers the conversation about Lounds, brings breakfast to his session with Daniel, and finds Will.

Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

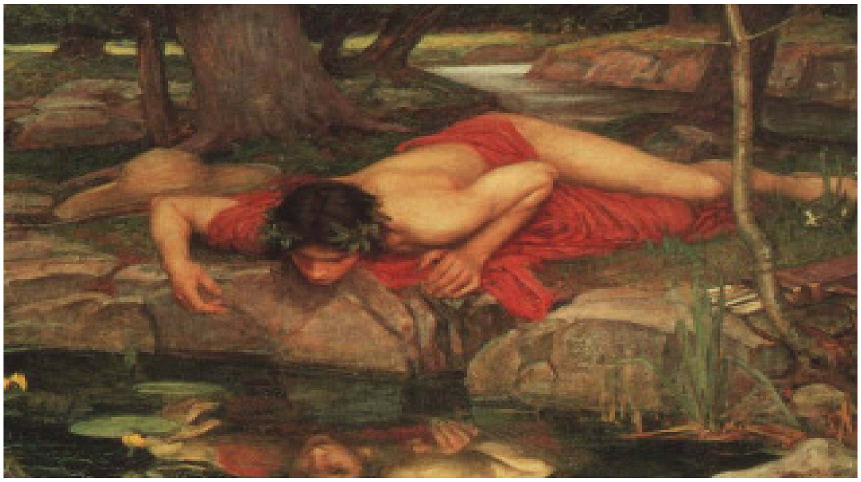
> Hannibal returns to his memory palace to finish his evening with Will, has his session with Daniel, and at last…finds Will.
>
> “She told Alana that neither of us is the killer she's writing about, but together, we might be.”
>
> “Might be. Speculation. Her incendiary brand of journalism is designed to increase the number of hits on her blog. She probably counts them every night.” Will had waved a hand in air, curt and dismissive.
>
> “Will, tabloid or not, her remarks to Alana are slanderous.”
>
> “It’s not slander if it’s true.” Will had said quietly, his toes finding Hannibal’s leg beneath the layers of sheets and blankets and poking him for emphasis.

Chapter Notes

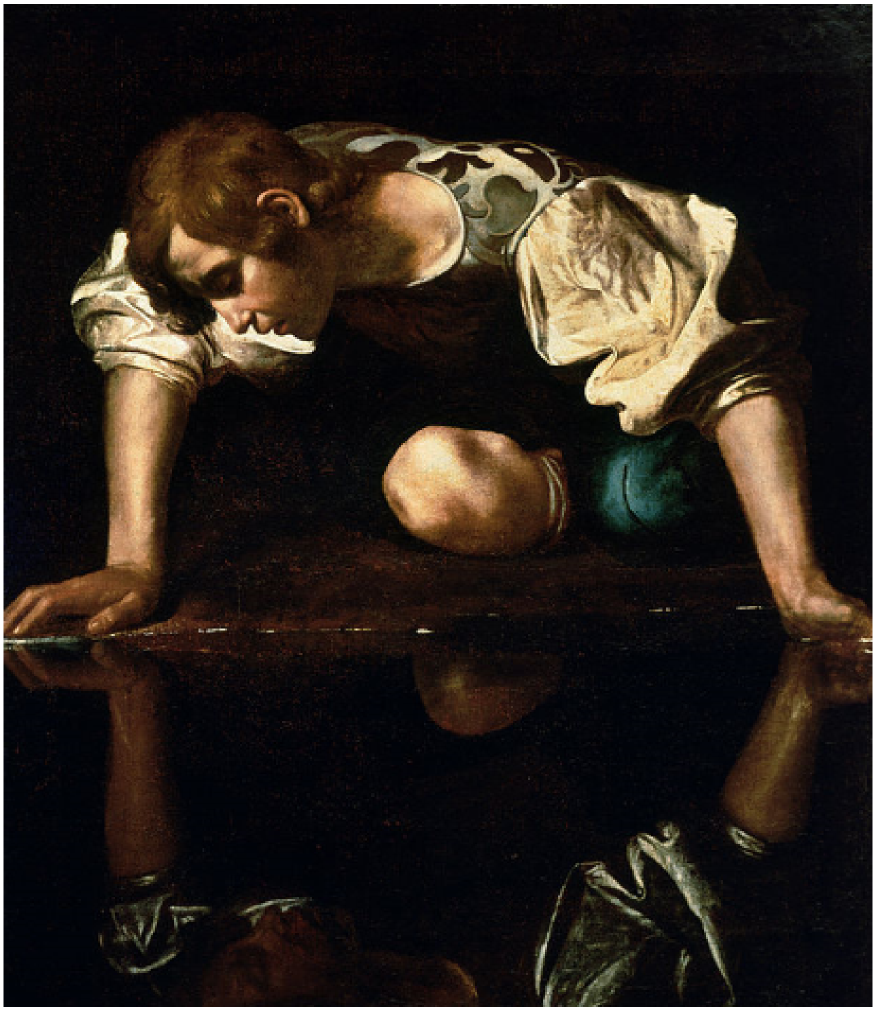
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 53

Hannibal returns to his memory palace to finish his evening with Will, has his session with Daniel, and at last…finds Will.



Cropped Echo and Narcissus John William Waterhouse 1903



Narcissus Caravaggio 1597

Hannibal leans over slightly to gaze at his reflection in polished steel, buffed to perfection, so it shines spotless and pristine concealing the sins of the hands that caress its surface now. Hannibal turns the handle of the meat grinder to the plaintive strains of Chopin. The haunting piano of his *Ballade No. 1 in G minor*, plucks at the sonorous chords deep within his splintered soul, plying him away from the scent of freshly ground meat at his fingertips, from the confines of the chamber of the condemned. And, like the notes of fine liqueur released from a fragile crystal snifter cradled in his smooth palms, the memories flow exquisite and warm.

Hannibal had removed the empty tumbler of whiskey from Will's hand his fingers brushing Hannibal's lightly, wisps of shadows barely there and then gone. Will's entire body had been flush as he had stood with his forehead pressed against Hannibal's chin in silent invitation. Head bowed and lashes pressed tightly together, unaware of the departure of Alana and her taxi.

Hannibal had swept his lips across Will's forehead, his nose detecting the various scents mingled in his hair, a road map of where he had been that day. He had smelled of fresh cut lumber, of metal scrapings and sandpaper, of snow soaked canines. And beneath the lingering smells of his day, had been Will's own scent faint but distinct. Will's scent was unique and Hannibal had smelled him often enough without embellishment to discern between the peculiar blend of musk and sweetness that fairly bled from his pores and the odors clinging to him.

Will’s hand had dropped from the glass and Hannibal had felt the tentative tug of his fingers on the edge of his suit jacket, at first wandering restlessly beneath it until, finding refuge at his waist, had splayed his fingers wide across the fabric of his waistcoat, to curl a finger through a belt loop closing the space between them. Hannibal had stood with one hand still ruffling curls, the other holding the tumbler aloft as gusts of bracing Baltimore wind had shaken the panes of glass.

“She’s gone.” Hannibal had spoken into unruly waves of brown, his eyes trailing the faded crimson lights of the receding taxi, and the confounded visage of Alana Bloom. “As you wanted.”

A soft chuckle had rumbled from deep in Will’s throat, “As I wanted, of course.”

“It’s chilly here without the fireplace lit. And I have a kitchen to tend to.”

Hannibal had felt him disentangle from the embrace. He had walked back a few steps, drawn his shoulders up and nodded toward the lighted kitchen. Together they had left the salon, the sacred inner sanctum neither had spoiled with sinister speculations and acrid accusations.

Will had blinked furiously upon entering the kitchen, Hannibal thinks not so much from the bright light as from shifting from one state of consciousness to another. Hannibal had watched black pupils shrink and irises fill with pale blue once more to gaze at him beneath fluttering lashes.

“You pricked Alana this evening.” Hannibal had said while assigning the dirty dishes to their proper places in the dishwasher.

Leaving the remains of Mason’s hog to Hannibal, Will had pulled open the drawer where Hannibal kept dishtowels and pulled one out before walking to the sink where shiny pots and pans still dripped onto the drain board. Picking up one of the larger sauce pans to dry, he had turned aside from the counter to stand in profile. To observe, reflect and deflect all at the same time, of course.

“She has a way of tugging at the short hairs while grinding her heel at the same time.” Will had said, lips sliding sideways, perhaps surprised at the slip, more likely at the candor.

“That’s a long walk she’s taken with you. I remember when you burst through my door to tell me you kissed her.”

Will’s mouth had crinkled, bitter creases lining his face. “And what a short walk it was to your bedroom.”

“We are still talking about Alana?”

The creases had deepened, tongue had teased teeth, but the retort had not spilled out. Will had set the saucepan down and grabbed another, a little aggressively Hannibal had thought, and had wiped the towel across the stainless steel until it had gleamed, his body and face still in profile as he had leaned against the counter.

Hannibal could wait for Will to walk around the vexing topic of Lounds as long as he needed. Hannibal had known he would assimilate and synthesize Hannibal’s words in an effort to extrapolate his designs on her before disclosing his own thoughts. Patience was an attribute they shared, like so many others.

Hannibal had continued to scrape bowls and dishes and load the dishwasher, and Will had continued to dry the pans until either his thoughts had quieted or he had suddenly found the sounds of domesticity too disturbing.

“And um…what was up with dessert this evening?”

“Too rich?” A sidelong glance from Will, “The greater the intellect; the greater the need for amusement.”

“Very amusing to you, apparently. As if that print on the wall weren’t enough. Strange, she didn’t seem to notice it.”

“As many times as she has been here, she has rarely commented on any of the art pieces. Her awareness of her immediate physical environment is cursory at best. Unless the work of art is thrust upon her awareness, she does not see it.”

The works of art thrust upon Alana had not been on the wall. Strange that Will had not noticed how she had been unable to tear her gaze from either of them all evening. That he had not noticed her eyes flicker each time his tongue had licked drops of wine from his moistened lips, or had lifted his chin to drink deeply from his glass. That he had not noticed she had noticed Hannibal noticing her and all her noticing. Alana had certainly noticed Hannibal’s attention to Will.

Hannibal wonders if she had felt the shifting of Will’s focus from her to Hannibal as the evening had progressed. Hannibal thinks not. It had not been until the taxi had pulled away that she had understood her place at the table. There had been no contest been between Hannibal and Will for her favor. The favor had been Hannibal’s to bestow all evening, not hers.

“No, I don’t really see her spending time at the Walter’s galleries down the waterfront.” Will had said, referring to the art museum in Inner Harbor known for its ancient and classical collections.

Hannibal had attended many functions at Baltimore’s fine art museum. He had enjoyed one of the special exhibits immensely the last time he had been there. The curator had prepared a presentation of forgeries. Guests had been challenged to detect the originals from their respective imitations. A stimulating exercise; even Hannibal had failed to identify all the originals.

Hannibal had made a mental note to ask Will if he had ever been later. It had turned out he had. He had attended the same exhibit, though on a different day. He had gone alone, of course. Just like Hannibal.

“Tell me, as you sat watching her eat, did you imagine what she was feeling?”

“Full, I’d imagine…”

Hannibal had frowned and raised a brow. So infuriating.

“You watched her same as I. You could imagine her thoughts as she sat rubbing her legs like a cricket beneath the table.” Hannibal had thought of breasts full beneath her blouse, nipples practically poking holes through her bra. Impossible to miss.

“Then, you don’t need me to tell you what she was feeling.”

“I don’t experience my imagination the way you do. You imagined her emotions, felt them yourself, her desire compounded your own.”

Will had set the stainless steel lid on the countertop to turn to Hannibal, the towel hanging limp and damp from his fingers, head angled to one side.

“And what were my desires, doctor?”

“The ones at the table or in the salon just now?”

A long pause and then, “The difference between you and Alana is that *she* was uncomfortable with the idea of analyzing me while fucking me.”

He had retrieved the dish towel and had resumed attacking the remainder of pots and lids on the drain board with focused diligence.

“You’re rude when you’re upset, Will.”

“I’m not upset. I’m pointing out that she had reservations about intimacy. She with her issues and me with mine.”

“Perhaps she was equally uncomfortable with the idea of you getting in her head? I’m not uncomfortable with that, either.”

Will had grabbed another piece of cookware from the drain board. He had held the pot a few seconds, catching his reflection in the shiny metal and Hannibal had seen the tightening of muscles in his neck followed by the lifting of his head to stare down the other end of the kitchen.

Hannibal had rarely caught Will looking at his reflection he rather avoided it as far as Hannibal had been able to tell. On those rare occasions when Hannibal had caught Will staring at his likeness, the pale face framed by the ever present mass of tousled curls and pale blue eyes looking back at him had always been somber, wrought with puzzlement, as though looking for something. Hannibal had thought Will afraid to look too long because the image might actually show him.

Hannibal thinks now that Will had not looked long at his reflection because he no longer recognized the face staring back at him. A similar expression had graced his features when Hannibal had first presented him with the anatomically perfect charcoal sketches preserved on thick buff colored pages of textured drawing paper. Unnerved certainly at the intimacy Hannibal’s sumptuously rendered nudes had suggested, but unaccepting that the images had represented him.

This isn’t me. This…is your ideal of me. This person does not exist…except in your imagination.

But he did exist. Hannibal had drawn who he had become. Will insisted on seeing himself as he had been. Hannibal had pointed a finger still flecked with charcoal at the drawing and had looked up at Will standing over him, the perpetual frown in place, until his pale blue eyes had softened and his hand had found Hannibal’s shoulder giving it a gentle squeeze.

Hannibal cannot imagine a time when Will had not been at odds with himself, never realizing that the more he fought against his true nature, the more miserable he would become.

Hannibal had realized what his tortured patient had needed.

And, Will, the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else.

Alana had stung Will. What Will had imagined Alana had thought of him had hurt. She had avoided him before his arrest and incarceration citing his instability as the reason. When Will had sent his adoring acolyte to kill Hannibal, Alana had been profoundly shaken. Her faith in Will had also been shaken to its foundations. By the time Will had been proven innocent, at least of what he had been accused of, it had been too late. The damage had been done. She had chosen Hannibal.

Do you know why Will tried to kill me? It wasn't to avenge Beverly Katz's death. It was to prevent yours. He was protecting you in the only way he felt he had left to him.

I'm afraid Will opened a door inside himself and no one knows if it closed again. Especially not Will.

Then it's healthy he's back in therapy. With a good psychiatrist.

Hannibal had painted Will as primal predator and potentially possessive mate and had used Alana's guilt over burying him in Hannibal's bed to ensure such offensive inclinations fed the seeds of doubt and rejection already germinating in her head. Hannibal had worked very hard at making her see what he had wanted her to see. About him, and Will. Alana's own insecurity had done the rest.

Alana had been a willing and beautiful tool of manipulation, a distraction for which Hannibal had felt fondly; but a distraction nonetheless.

"Will, Alana was never going to pursue an intimate relationship with you."

"Too unstable, I know."

"Too disparate, socially."

"Well now, I suppose, after being accused of murder…no *five* murders…"

"That…was an unfortunate but necessary…"

The stone cold glare from Will had caused Hannibal to pause both his response and the loading of the dishwasher. A look like that from anyone else might have garnered satisfaction, invited provocation, but not Will. Hannibal had not meant to wound or incite.

Will had quickly looked aside and cleared his throat, choking back whatever comment he had decided to swallow. Hannibal had reminded himself that Will was working through several issues at once. He was always processing many things at once.

Will was as one of the beautiful delicate roses in his garden, about to bloom but riddled with thorns. Hannibal knows the thorniest rose is often the sturdiest, but one must handle it with care.

"Will, think about it. Has she ever invited you over for dinner? Has Jack ever invited you over to dine with him and Bella? Have you even met Bella?"

"No." Will had said, looking aside, "Hardly an indication of snobbery or a demonstration of social class. I'm not destitute, far from it."

"If we were only talking about comparing incomes, I would agree. You are not from the same rung on the social ladder and you know it. You don't socialize. You have no friends, Will."

Hannibal had started the dishwasher and begun to wrap up the hog in Saran wrap to stuff into the fridge. Will would take some home with him the next day for sandwiches, or perhaps to feed to the dogs. Hannibal had no use for reheated meat.

“They know I avoid people, and they know why. So do you.”

Hannibal could well imagine a lunch between Jack and Will. Jack, all business wolfing down a sandwich just released from its cellophane wrapping hurling questions at Will, who would be half listening while trying to block out not only the crime scene, but the other customers bustling about so he too could swallow down enough nourishment to soothe the acid churning in his stomach from a morning filled with too much caffeine and adrenaline and Jack.

“I know what your tell yourself. But in truth, you are overwhelmed by the meaningless and mundane, upset and appalled by the mendacity of daily life that pulses from everyone around you, knowing that you don’t connect or relate. A constant reminder you’ll never…

“Stop. Just…stop. Are you talking about me, or you?”

Hannibal had merely raised a brow at Will and turned back around to the hog, his tongue clicking against the roof of his mouth, a gentle reprimand. It is an insufferable breach of manners to interpose on one’s thoughts like that; a regular habit for Will. And only Will had ever interrupted him and lived to commit the offense, again and again.

Hannibal would suffer it in perpetuity to have Will at his side in this moment. His hands smooth the links of sausages as he places them in their zip lock bags. He glances at the twins, still groggy but subdued. Hannibal had found some bungee cords with hooks, an impulse purchase he had all but forgotten as a kindness to brighten the day of the wearied store clerk who had patiently and politely assisted Hannibal in acquiring the hardware for this current enterprise.

He commences cleaning the meat grinder, its task completed as his thoughts return again to Baltimore, and Will.

Will had stood leaning upon the counter, pots and pans already put back in their proper places. Hannibal had watched him fold the dishtowel and set it next to the sink. His gaze had wandered around the kitchen until finally directing smoldering blue eyes back at Hannibal.

“You don’t like most people, Will.”

“Doesn’t mean I want to kill them for their meaningless mendacity. Who am I; or you for that matter, to judge?”

“I exist outside their social order, and so do you. That’s who we are.”

Hannibal had closed the door to the fridge and begun washing his hands over the sink, the residue of the hog a greasy film on his skin and beneath his fingernails. Hannibal had been able to smell the roasted flesh despite the dish soap. Mason’s pig had permeated his skin much like Mason had pervasively affronted his sensibilities. Hannibal had dried his hands and replaced the towel precisely where Will had placed it, always consciously reinforcing how alike they were.

“What social ladder are you talking about?” Will’s eyes had trailed from the sink to Hannibal’s face, mouth drawn up, brows arched and furrowed.

“Did you ever read my paper on social exclusion?”

“I did. That’s part of the reason I wanted to know if you planned on writing any papers about me. Besides being the catnip of psychiatric circles, I seem to fit your social exclusion theory.”

"Stigmatization is by consensus. Necessary to the survival of a hierarchical society."

"Well, I'm definitely stigmatized. You saw to that."

"You had already essentially stigmatized yourself. You realized you were different at an early age. So did I. We reacted differently to that realization."

"Yes. I don't even try to meet society's normative expectations. You on the other hand mimic those expectations expertly. And yet…"

"We are both alone. A community of the rarefied."

"Two is not a community."

"No. It is perhaps enough."

Hannibal had moved to stand beside him, teasing himself with the heat from Will's body, but not touching him. Desire is fire, igniting it an act of creation and allowing it to consume an act of delicious destruction. Mere proximity had fanned flames hot enough to roast entrails and boil blood.

"You had already isolated yourself with your anti-social behavior, compounded with manufactured neuroses. Built barriers and forts to…"

"To contain associations I didn't want, but they came crashing around me anyway. I was keeping afloat…until you."

Will's words had been delivered softly, not accusingly. A matter of fact he had internalized but had yet to fully embrace.

"Until I saw you were drowning. Social exclusion is not always consensual; it is sometimes a choice. Or a revelation."

"It's not an excuse to cross the boundaries of accepted social mores of behavior."

"Boundaries are negotiable as you well know."

"Oh, the irony." Will had said adopting another bitter smile accompanied by upturned palms closing into frustrated fists as he had turned to look out the window. He had traced a finger around his reflection in the dark glass before turning to face Hannibal once again.

"You write a dissertation exposing society's systematic stigmatization of certain groups, figuratively cannibalizing its own while you do so literally, holding yourself completely exempt from its social norms and hunting in plain sight."

"An interesting observation. Though, I do not exempt myself from social norms; I have simply made my own."

"You have managed to out-Nietzsche Nietzsche."

"And God wept. Shall we retire upstairs?"

Hannibal had looked into long suffering pale blue eyes and had noted the mouth twisted in an effort to contain the grin Will had been trying to suppress. Will had gestured for Hannibal to go ahead first, shaking the tousled mane of curls as he switched off the kitchen light to follow Hannibal upstairs. Hannibal had wondered at which of them Will had been shaking his head as he had walked up the stairs, Will in tow, already unbuttoning his shirt.

After asking Will how long he had spent outside with the dogs that afternoon, Will had sniffed at his shirt and pulled it off, the rest of his clothes coming off in quick succession to fall gracelessly into the arm chair to be gathered up and laundered. Will had left his shoes at the bottom of the bed until the sight of Hannibal's chin resting on his neck, eyes peeled and head angled at the offending placement had caused him to sigh in resignation and move his shoes to the closet before crossing to the bathroom to shower. Hannibal had watched his naked form move across the room admiring Will's own brand of predatory elegance in every step.

Jack Crawford should have seen his awkward profiler swagger like that into the FBI's lab.

Hannibal had smiled inwardly at the favorable response to conditioning, the impulse to please Hannibal firmly in place. The rewards Hannibal always bestowed upon Will for his demonstrations of acquiescence had reinforced the positive associations Hannibal wanted Will to experience whenever he indulged his impulses. Obedience had been an impulse Hannibal had desired to cultivate in Will.

They were so much alike. Hannibal had recognized in Will an inner-strength and intelligence to match his own. As Will would evolve and come into his own, Hannibal had also recognized the need to instill psychological safeguards to ensure dominance. To preserve that particular dynamic as long as possible. That perceived dominance had been an illusion. He had not realized it until Will had looked up at him from the blood stained floor of his kitchen. Will had undermined nearly all of Hannibal's careful manipulations. By using Hannibal's own conditioning against him Will had instilled within Hannibal his own conditioning that had played a melody upon heartstrings Hannibal had not known he had. Had done it masterfully. Infuriatingly so.

Will had found Hannibal's Achilles' heel, aimed his bow and let fly the arrow that had pierced him so deeply the wound bleeds still.

And yet, even with all the manipulation and deception, Hannibal believes there was a part of Will that genuinely loved him, loves him still.

The washing machine had hummed while Will had taken his shower; the tweed jacket had been hung in the steamer to emerge fresh and fragrant the next morning. Hannibal had not minded tending to Will's clothes. Tossing a few more articles of clothing into the machine had been simple enough. The shy and grateful smile from Will at seeing his shirts and pants pressed had more than compensated for the few minutes it had taken to iron his off the rack attire.

Will had joined him in bed refreshed and fragrant, slipping between the sheets groaning softly as the cool satin had slid over his skin. His delight at the sensation had quickly given way to irritation as soon as he had turned on his side to face Hannibal, nose dipping into the soft cream colored pillow case. He had taken several sniffs before sitting up, mouth opened in disbelief and an accusing gleam had sparked behind wide blue eyes.

"Alana was here."

“Last night. And the night before.”

Hannibal had been perplexed by the astounded expression he had found looking back at him. He thinks now that Will had been with Margot one of those evenings. She had brought tidings of her pregnancy not long after.

“Honesty is situational with you, isn’t it?’ Will had snapped, “And you couldn’t change the sheets.”

“I was…curious what you might imagine. Perhaps you have already been here with Alana.”

Will had abruptly turned away to stare into the fireplace. Hannibal had watched his chest rise and fall with calming breaths, noting the shift in the musculature along his shoulders as he had twisted his torso and braced his weight on his arm. Hannibal had thought of his drawing pad on the table, but had dismissed the thought just as quickly. He had committed the pose to memory, instead.

“What are your intentions with Alana? Besides the obvious?”

Will had gestured to the bed and had lifted his eyes to look squarely at Hannibal still reclining upon his pillow.

“You think I am using her to manipulate you.”

“Aren’t you? You made very pointed references to her well-being while I was locked up. After Beverly…”

Katz’s last name had hung unspoken in the air as had the rest of his thought. Will had winced, the painful emotions associated with Beverly’s demise returned fresh to moisten his eyes. But, rather than turn away, he had held Hannibal’s gaze.

Hannibal had swallowed and closed his eyes, a rare moment of indecision on his part and an honest moment of reflection. Though Will likely interpreted it as more manipulation. Hannibal had never admitted to killing her, but Will’s relationship with him was ever evolving and to insult him at this point with continued denial would be unwise and would strangle the fragile honesty that had taken root between them.

Precious little, but honesty had bloomed if one knew where to look for it and Hannibal had wanted desperately to keep it, to build on it. Someday, he would be able to be completely honest with Will. And he would demand the same degree of honesty from Will. Trust is so important between therapist and patient…and friends.

“The survival impulse is strongest of all, Will. Beverly invaded my home. I know you did not send her here, would not have sent her here. An evening of coincidence and opportunity. Most regrettable.”

Will had sat motionless, absorbing Hannibal’s words his eyes glistening in the light of the flames from the fire crackling across the room. Those pale blue eyes had also flickered with flames of regret that seemed for a moment to envelop his entire being. He had nodded drawing a deep breath, acknowledging his acceptance of the closest he was going to get to an admission or an apology. They had not spoken of Katz again.

“And Alana?” Will had asked after a moment, gazing into the fireplace.

“Alana has nothing to fear from me. Unless, of course, something changes.”

Will had rolled his eyes back to Hannibal and his fingers had paused in their idle stroking of whiskers. Nostrils had flared and the tic of a latent snarl had sent a quiver along his upper lip. The predator had emerged and Hannibal had been happy to see him.

“Lounds.” Will had said imbuing the singular syllable with contempt.

“Lounds is a problem.”

“Lounds is a tabloid writer who enjoys rattling people. Alana was rattled, that’s all.”

“I am not certain of that.”

“Alana could not possibly believe her. She doesn’t want to believe her.”

“And yet she felt compelled to cross examine us at the dinner table. If Lounds can get to Alana…”

“She can get to Jack.”

“He reads Tattle Crime, too. She is a problem requiring a solution.”

“I agree.”

“She is a problem we could solve together.”

“If we agreed on the solution. We don’t. Impulses follow instinct. My instinct tells me to wait.”

“You would wait for opportunity to knock. I prefer to create opportunity in this instance.”

“Restraint has its virtues.”

“If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn our power, Will. You are limiting yourself.”

“I’m not saying I couldn’t kill her, but it would have to be the right circumstances. You keep saying that urges can be controlled with discipline, and conquered with obedience.”

“That was the night after you killed Tier. We were talking about your urges. Urges can be your undoing unless you control them. You almost came undone with Ingram in the barn. If I hadn’t been there…”

“I would have blown his head off and enjoyed it. A missed opportunity.”

It won't feel the same, Will. It won't feel like killing me.

It doesn't have to.

“A missed opportunity you still regret?”

“No. I got over it.” Will had lifted his head, eyes searching Hannibal’s as teeth had kneaded lips in anticipation of Hannibal’s response.

The implications had been clear enough. Hannibal would get over not killing Lounds. Hannibal had thought Will had not appreciated the nature of the threat Lounds posed. Hannibal would not get over slick soliloquies plastered all over her website about him. He pressed a finger into Will's knee.

"She told Alana that neither of us is the killer she's writing about, but together, we might be."

"*Might* be. Speculation. Her incendiary brand of journalism is designed to increase the number of hits on her blog. She probably counts them every night." Will had waved a hand in air, curt and dismissive.

"Will, tabloid or not, her remarks to Alana are slanderous."

"It's not slander if it's true." Will had said quietly, his toes finding Hannibal's leg beneath the layers of sheets and blankets and poking him for emphasis.

"There are appearances to maintain."

"Then sue her. Everyone else does."

"She hasn't printed anything…yet. I am not inclined to wait. And neither should you be. You are an especially favorite target."

"All the more reason to let her run with it. The more she writes about me, the more she appears on a witch hunt."

"Guilty or not, witches are condemned and hung. I've had my share of being at the mercy of a rope."

Will had raised a brow at Hannibal's oblique reference to Brown's attack on him at the pool. He had turned his head but not before allowing Hannibal to see his eyes flicker wickedly and lips pucker then spread into a satisfied smile. So infuriating…so incredibly wantonly unrepentant. And so beautiful, Hannibal had ached to take all that beauty inside himself, to utterly devour him right then.

"Let us allow opportunity to decide the solution. I'll apply mine and you apply yours."

Will had nodded his silent assent before crawling under the sheets and blankets to curl his body around Hannibal's, his leg over Hannibal's thigh tightly like a vice drawing their bodies close so he could nuzzle into Hannibal's' neck. Hannibal had sighed and opened his throat to the graze of teeth and the tantalizing trace of Will's tongue along his skin.

And when Hannibal had endured all the pleasure he could stand from Will's predatory predilections, the lion had turned his raw savage desires upon his fledgling cub without mercy. He had nearly taken Will apart, limb from delicious limb, until Will had sobbed against him, body racked with tremors as Hannibal's cock had slackened inside, release sweet and hot as the blood that coursed through their veins.

Will had tumbled back onto the mattress, body limp and mind dazed as it always was afterward. A vision of sheer decadence on his pillow, hair a disheveled mane lying damp against his head and that face…a most pleasing combination of the mortal and the divine. Hannibal had taken up his drawing pad and charcoal pencils and had sketched Will lying in repose as the sweat had dried and the fire had died.

Hannibal had watched him retreat into slumber, safe in the arms of Hypnos awaiting the dreams of Morpheus. As Will had drifted off Hannibal had noted the peaceful expression on his face, no furrowed brow to indicate troubling thoughts, no tossing or turning upon the sea of satin beneath him. No nightmares for Will in Hannibal's bed.

As Hannibal had smoothed the damp stubborn curls from his face, thoughts of Alana Bloom and Freddie Lounds had stirred in his mind to mingle with Will's words spoken earlier. As his mind had turned with the consequences of each action he had considered, he had settled on a solution. He had sat in an empty hotel room for hours and had returned home to find Will had beaten him to it. Will's solution would engender unintended consequences of the most lethal kind. But that afternoon, he had found himself sitting in Jack Crawford's office listening to what he knows now was a rehearsed performance.

Hannibal considers that Will was clueing him to alternatives that evening after dinner. He had Jack to appease. Actually killing Lounds on the heels of Tier would have set an entirely different scenario into play. He had been saving Hannibal, and himself. As Hannibal had saved him from the consequences of killing Ingram that day in the barn. Will had been so incensed at the insensitivity and cruelty leveled at Peter Bernardone that his urges had threatened to overrule his own survival instinct.

Killing Tier in self-defense had been much more aligned with his survival instinct. Killing for pleasure should be performed with a certain detachment. Hunting is a passion to be sure, but one's conduct needs be circumspect and careful.

Hannibal mourns another instance of missed communication between them. Hannibal considers it possible that Will had believed he had no choice but to spare Lounds. Perhaps the ice he had been skating on with Jack had been thinner than Hannibal had suspected. But, smelling Lounds on Will that day in his office while they had been bonding, discussing plans about leaving together, had wounded Hannibal more deeply than he had been willing to admit at the time.

Time. The timing of his discovery had figured prominently in Hannibal's subsequent actions. Detecting the odor of Lounds on Will's clothes and in his hair in that singular moment of oneness with Will had torn at Hannibal as surely as if Will had stabbed him in his heart. And Hannibal had stabbed him back with the very passion he had cautioned Will to avoid. Hannibal had been unable to think of the deception outside of the narrow scope of emotion when he had first become of aware of it. He has been trapped in that narrow scope until now.

Hannibal had quite simply lost his perspective. Only Will could hurt him like that. But, Will had told him exactly what he was going to do and Hannibal had not heard him.

Impulses follow instinct. My instinct tells me to wait.

The deception, the betrayal had gnawed at him, worms eating the marrow from his bones, vultures ripping at his flesh. Will had been in an impossible situation.

Opportunity had come knocking on Will's door. Will had sat in Jack's office next to Hannibal; both of them called in for questioning because of Lounds' desperate phone call, and had played his role so convincingly. Will had made up the part about the appointment for Hannibal. Will knew that Hannibal wanted to either kill her himself or share it with him. So, he had made up the lie about an appointment, knowing that Hannibal would believe he had willfully withheld so it would appear he had kept the pleasure of killing Lounds for himself. All with Uncle Jack's knowledge and consent. The fabrication floated in Jack's office had been scripted by Jack and Will, but Hannibal thinks mostly Will. Jack and Will had also been putting on a performance for Alana, who had been present at that meeting.

Both of them had been protecting Alana by creating clouds of doubt to hang over her head about both of them. Will had deliberately alienated himself from her. He had not been able to push her far away enough.

With that phone call Lounds had given herself a reprieve. With that phone call, Will could not have killed her. Were it not for that phone call, Hannibal thinks Will would have killed her. Will would not have invited her to his home to reveal an FBI undercover operation. He could have met her anywhere for that.

Knowing her screams would be received, recorded, and relentlessly researched by the FBI, Will had chosen to hand her over to Jack. With one stroke, Will had solved, at least temporarily, his immediate problem and had given Jack, Lounds, and Hannibal what they wanted.

Jack had been placated in the wake of Tier; Lounds was off the radar and effectively silenced, and Hannibal had been left to believe Will was the killer he wanted him to be.

Will had been forced to deal with an untenable situation, knowing she had an open phone line to the FBI. If she had actually had an appointment Will still would not have told him. He would not have wanted to risk Hannibal driving out to his home to meet Lounds. She had shown up at his house to snoop. She would have never made an appointment to talk to the man she had repeatedly called a serial killer alone, at his house, in the middle of nowhere. She must have been terrified when he found her.

Neither would Lounds have subjected herself to Hannibal alone. Lounds had avoided Hannibal’s office since their initial meeting under her transparently obvious false pretenses. Lounds would have never approached Hannibal at his home in Chandal Square and neither would she have driven out to Wolf Trap, unless she had been hoping Will was not at home. Will’s car must have been in the garage, the house locked up, at least the dogs barking wildly and Will in the barn perhaps. Out of sight at any rate, or Lounds would not have gotten out of her car.

Will could not have known Hannibal had waited in Lounds’ hotel room for her although he likely imagined that was exactly what Hannibal would do. Neither could Will have explained to Hannibal his intentions. He couldn’t tell Hannibal because he wasn’t sure what Hannibal would do with the information. He could not anticipate how Hannibal would respond. Hannibal was too unpredictable, like himself. There had been too many variables to control and adjust for.

Will could have explained his actions at dinner, but had chosen not to. Hannibal thinks Will had already left Jack and Hannibal to Fate. Will had been caving under the weight of constant relentless pressure. He had shown up to Hannibal’s house having second thoughts?…and Hannibal had not given him a chance to explain. He had thrown his surprise of Abigail at him and then taken it away to show Will what he had thrown away for Jack and the FBI.

Will had been conflicted until the last minute, had not known himself what he had truly wanted until he had lain at Hannibal’s feet.

Not for the first time, Hannibal wonders for whom Will had drawn his gun. Will had shown up expecting what? A living Freddie Lounds meant FBI back up, but there had been none. Had Will feared the FBI for some reason? Will had called to warn him in hopes he would leave. Leave before

Jack arrived. But Jack had arrived early. And Hannibal had had no intentions of leaving without saying goodbye.

Jack had not been privy to their bedroom conversations, but between Will's questionable behavior and Du Maurier's interference, Jack had had his doubts. Will had kept Jack in the dark about many things. He had kept things from Hannibal, too. He had tried to maintain control of the situation. And he had done so masterfully, until it had all blown up in Will's face. Something had gone wrong and Hannibal cannot figure out what that was.

The twins have begun to stir and Hannibal pauses in the polishing of the grinder. The groans come from Luciano. Hannibal can see him twisting upon his soiled mattress, eyes still closed but not for long. Lucia will be waking soon, too.

He gathers up the bags of fresh sausage to carry upstairs. Once upstairs, he will prepare yet another syringe for Lucia, who will require pain killers for the next few days. Luciano will resume his daily sedatives until Hannibal locates Will. Finding Will is a priority. The longer he keeps the twins alive in his home, the greater the risk someone will notice them, or come looking for them.

Will let loose the hired help in hopes of luring Hannibal out into the open. He expects Hannibal to rid them both of Mason's executioners. He is probably wondering why he has not been summoned to a crime scene. Will should know that Hannibal has always wanted what was best for him.

Our conversations, Will, were only ever about you opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.

Will will not find the truth looking at crime scenes. Hannibal must open his eyes another way.

Perhaps he will hear from Roberta in the morning. Between his memories and whatever new information Roberta can offer, Hannibal is confident that he can extrapolate enough to create a more accurate picture of Will. Forgiveness apparently does simply happen, but prudence demands proof that it has also simply happened to the other predator circling the city.

On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Will hears the words in his head as Hannibal's voice licks at his ears sending a prickle along his neck to gather in a knot between shoulders smothered in soft down.

Will sits beneath the canopy of black wings, slick oily feathers at his back and rough warm stone beneath to scape against his naked skin. He folds his wings in close to more easily rest against the sturdy frame of the serpent tailed creature that hovers over him. Will and the eagle sit gazing across the smoldering landscape at the grouping of stones, rubble, and wood that had been Daniel's home.

The winged Daniel also sits on a large rock close by, occasionally glancing in Will's direction, but his attentions are focused on the terrace below. Like Will and the eagle, he is waiting for the viper to appear along the crest of the grassless hillside.

Feathers white and lustrous as pearls flutter and Daniel raises a pale arm to point a finger down the slope of the terrace beyond the rubble and debris at their feet.

See? Look sharp and see, Will.

Hannibal's voice breathes and Will feels the scrape of its beak along his scalp, a familiar sensation that summons memories of Hannibal's nose in his hair…

Will snaps awake to the irritating hum of Daniel's alarm clock. He hears Daniel groan and twist in the bed, imagines him reaching up to pound his fist onto the clock and then feels the flop of his body land back onto the mattress. Cara stirs at their feet, her wet nose nuzzles Will's toes causing him to curl them back and slide them back under the thin cotton that covers them.

Will thinks it must be Wednesday morning already and Daniel has hit the snooze button as usual. Will kicks him in the shin and Daniel kicks him back, turns away to bury his face into the pillow that he holds to him like a lover. Will grins and rubs the sleep out of his eyes.

Daniel loves his bed. He enjoys being in his bed more than anyone Will has ever met. Not that Will knows how all that many people feel about their beds, but still. Will has yet to see Daniel spring out of his in the morning. He is a sloth, procrastinating until the last possible minute. Will thinks if there was a way for Daniel to drag mattress and sheet into the bathroom with him he would.

Will pokes him in the shoulder.

"You said you didn't want to be late again. Something about your new patient having to wait last time?"

Daniel's eyes flutter open to stare into Will's face as Will leans over him. Daniel groans again into his fingers before sliding them over his face and he rubs at eyes still unfocused and lidded. After a moment he clicks off the alarm before it can go off again.

"Thanks. I really should get up." He mutters through his fingers.

Daniel does not move.

"Out." Will says. "Want to go out?"

"Will, don't…"

"Out, Cara. You want to go outside, Cara? Good girl…"

The black dog no longer rests submissively at their feet. Cara is up and bounding all over the bed. Both Daniel's dogs have managed to assimilate a small but useful vocabulary. Very useful, Will thinks. Especially when one is so intimate with the morning routine.

"Let's go outside!" Will croons into Cara's ears, ruffling the fur at her throat.

Daniel tosses the sheet aside and gets up, throws his pillow at Will. "You win, I'm up."

Will watches him stagger as he navigates his way to the bathroom. Cara paces, her nose to the rug. When Daniel returns to the bedroom, he looks sufficiently awake. He pulls on a pair of sweat shorts over his boxers, a tee and his sneakers. Cara dances around his feet the entire time, eyes bright and tail wagging like a banner. Daniel stoops to run fingers down her back and she rears up on her hind legs to lick his face.

Images of Winston and the others bubble up and Will closes his eyes remembering better days.

Daniel looks over at Will as he ties the laces on his Nikes. Will appears relatively rested this morning all things considered. He had tossed restlessly himself, but like so many other things associated with Will, he was becoming used to the disrupted sleep patterns that sharing the bed caused. Will still awoke startled in the mornings, alarm or not, disoriented and unsure of where he was, but at least he was no longer waking up in cold sweat. The sweating had dissipated quite a lot, at least the sweating caused by dreaming.

Daniel smiles to himself, glances at Will lying on his back his eyes half closed, drifting, barely in the room and almost someplace else.

“I’ll be outside walking them. Maybe you could make some coffee?” Daniel says loudly enough to cause Will to shake himself fully awake once more.

“Sure.”

“How did you sleep?”

“I slept. Go. I’ll get the coffee.”

Will had listened to Daniel come back inside, the unmistakable slam of the back door resonating throughout the old house. He had listened to the sounds of rustling about the kitchen, the clinking of the spoon against the coffee cup, the microwave beeping to signal the hot water was ready to pour into the bowls of dog kibble.

With every passing day the sounds become more familiar and welcome and part of Will finds the comfort he draws from the increasing familiarity settling warmly in his chest. Another part of Will resists as he reminds himself this is all fleeting, that he will be robbed of all of it. One way or another, Hannibal will take it all from him, piece by piece, or all at once.

Will hears the shower shut off and sits up in bed to wait for Daniel to emerge from the bathroom to get dressed, images of the nude and winged Daniel perched on his rock fresh in his mind.

On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Hannibal’s voice had intoned the words; Daniel had not spoken them. Hannibal was referring to Daniel while all of them had been looking for the viper, waiting for it to make an appearance again. Will makes a mental note to look up the passage he knows must be a quote from…something. What does Hannibal want him to see? Or, rather what does the part of him that identifies with Hannibal want him to see.

Will looks up to see Daniel walking past the foot of the bed, towel around waist and arms and shoulders speckled with droplets of water that roll off wet hair combed back flat against his head. Will wants to lick the moisture from every inch, every crevice of Daniel’s body. His patient will have to wait…again.

Will lurches from the bed and tugs on the towel insistently but Daniel holds it fast.

“Oh, no. I’ll be late.”

“You say that every time.” Will continues to tug, stretching the terrycloth more tautly with each wrench of his wrist.

“You wake up like this all the time, Will. Maybe abandoning psychoanalysis was premature…”

“You’re not sure if we’re having therapy or having sex?” Will grins.

The hopeful look on Will’s face is endearing. Will is almost always endearing, especially first thing in the morning, like this. Daniel feels the heat rising, the tightening of his balls and the twitch of his cock knowing full well Will’s body is just as tight and twitchy as his own under the thin sheet. He can’t differentiate his own feelings from Will’s. He supposes it doesn’t matter if they are feeling the same thing. It’s when they aren’t feeling the same that the intrusion of Will’s emotions frightens him.

“Therapy, apparently. Isn’t it always?” Daniel says, his tone light but irritation rubs at him regardless.

This dreaming about Hannibal and then wanting to fuck in the mornings is unspeakably strange to say the least. Daniel isn’t sure how he feels about it at this point. He’s feeling kind of…used.

‘‘No…” Will lets go of the towel and wraps his fingers around Daniel’s wrist instead. “Not always. Not now.”

Daniel looks into the pale blues eyes fairly pleading in the morning light, and rolls his eyes knowing he is going to relent. *Damn him.*

He sees the satisfied smile from Will as he allows Will to pull him into the bed and snatch the towel away. The thought that he just sold his soul, again, clings to his consciousness, like dust collecting in the corner. And as the devil in his bed sucks payment from willing lips, he opens his soul to receive him.

“Shit!”

Daniel slams the door to the Mercedes and practically runs to the back door of his office. His new watch reads eight fifty-two. Daniel waves to Maria and bounds up the steps taking two at a time. He pushes impatiently at the door, stuck again with humidity, and nearly trips on the carpet when it bursts open.

He drops the attaché case on the floor and straightens the turquoise and cream paisley tie and then runs his hands over pale pink pressed cotton shirt and wilted lapels of the jacket he realized on the drive in, was missing a button. He glances about the room, absently fingering the curls that dried sticking out the wrong way. He notices the water pitcher on the coffee table and makes a mental note to refill it.

His foot taps on the rug as he waits for his laptop to boot up and he begins rifling through the stack of file folders sitting there since Monday where he had left them rather than pack them in his attaché case like he should have. He pulls out Victor Boucher’s file and reads quickly, very quickly as he glances at the clock on his computer. He looks down and grimaces at the black dog hair clinging to cream colored trousers.

Damn him…

Hannibal sits at the same café across the street from Clayton's office as he had before, sipping his expresso, a curl of lemon rind floats on top imparting a note of citrus to the thick hot coffee at his lips. The morning paper rests in his lap though he has barely glanced at the headlines. He has been looking forward to his session with Clayton this morning with more than just a twinge of delightful anticipation.

He has watched the harried Clayton rush from his car to his office, a flurry of dark curls and pale linen. He wonders how someone as classy and successful as Clayton clearly is cannot be more punctual. He takes another sip of expresso and thinks intelligence comes in all forms. A creative mind is often a cluttered mind, as Hannibal well knows.

At precisely nine Hannibal is standing at the door to Clayton's office, smiling at the warm, albeit confused smile on Clayton's handsome face as he looks down at the two black tote bags that dangle from Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal thinks it very nice to see him…alive.

"Hello Victor. Right on time…"

Hannibal smiles and steps inside. He is again struck by the décor and the sea of blue that greets him in Clayton's spacious office. He walks directly to the coffee table and begins to unpack the totes, taking out a dark red linen tablecloth first to slide over the polished surface of the table.

"May I?" Hannibal says as he continues to remove items from the totes.

Daniel stands at the other side of the table, lips pressed tight in amusement at the older man fussing over the containers and thermoses he lifts gingerly and sets on the coffee table. He realizes the one tote is thermal and his stomach grumbles as Hannibal lifts the lid from a container releasing the smell of toasted onion and fresh basil.

The older man is casually dressed this morning, tailored tan slacks, pale blue designer tee, and a slightly darker blue suit jacket, finely cut accentuating broad shoulders and long torso. Daniel finds his style simple, sparse, and utilitarian. The man obviously comes from money, but he is not flashy about it. He wears only a watch, an expensive one, but no other jewelry adorns his person.

Daniel does not see any grey in his hair, and given the lines and creases there should be. Daniel wonders how close the shiny brunette locks come to Victor's natural color. There is plenty of grey in the stubble on his cheeks and chin. Daniel thinks some of that grey is dark blonde. Curious that.

"I noticed you have a habit of running late."

Hannibal looks up to find a familiar lop-sided grin that sends a pang to his chest. Green eyes glitter mischievously beneath Clayton's brow but he remains quiet, content to watch Hannibal arrange his containers around the table.

"I have the impression that you skip breakfast often and you shouldn't. It's the most important meal of the day."

"Well, I uh…didn't eat this morning, but I usually try."

Hannibal raises a brow at him and purses his lips slightly, chiding Clayton with his eyes. Clayton sucks in his lower lip and rolls his eyes. Hannibal's eyes cannot help but linger on the pink lips and the chiseled line of his jaw.

“Ok. I hardly ever eat a proper breakfast. Nothing like this.”

Hannibal watches Clayton’s eyes sweep over the small banquet he brought. Clayton stands up straight and tilts his head to the side, hands resting on hips below the leather belt that Hannibal notes fits snugly around his lean and slender waist. He notes the wrinkled jacket and the missing button. Clayton was in a big hurry this morning, but the ensemble works and he wears it well. Of course Hannibal knows what lies beneath the tailored suit and pressed shirt.

Although Hannibal had gazed upon Clayton’s nude body with the eyes of a doctor that night at Du Maurier’s, he had found much to admire about the young man. Clayton’s body is tight and muscular, very much like Will’s. And, Hannibal remembers, not without its share of tell-tale welts and faded bruises in the most intimate of places.

Thoughts of Du Maurier’s ruined evening almost bring a smile. Du Maurier must have been kicking herself silly after Hannibal had left. With bruises like those, Hannibal doubts Clayton shy in the bedroom or on the couch as it were. The fashionably clothed doctor gazing upon Hannibal’s gourmet feast is intriguing indeed.

“Wow. I don’t know what to say. This is really quite the spread you’ve laid out here.”

And it is. Daniel notes that Victor brought ceramic plates and coffee mugs and glasses…crystal glasses. Daniel blinks. The silverware is actually silver, polished silver.

“Say, thank you, and sit down to eat.”

Hannibal eases into the couch, perched on the edge and begins to pour hot steaming coffee from the tallest of the thermoses.

“Thank you.” Daniel says, slowly sinking into the cushions of the adjacent couch. “What are we having?”

“Scrambled eggs and sausage, fresh pineapple and peaches, and biscotti with either anisette or lemon. We have coffee, an exquisite house blend I was told, and fresh squeezed orange juice.”

“You brought all of this from home?”

“Of course. I am very particular about what goes into my body. And so, apparently are you.”

“Oh, I indulge in plenty of temptation.” Clayton says taking a bite of the eggs and sausage. “Oh god, this is delicious. What else is in this?”

“My own recipe. A protein scramble with the obvious and some herbs and spices, a little cheese. It varies with the season.”

“It’s uh…really tasty. The sausage is imported?”

"The meat is local. All the ingredients are."

Daniel licks his lips and Hannibal smiles just watching him eat. He hasn’t watched anyone but Du Maurier eat his cooking in a long time. The contentment he feels watching Clayton wolf down his breakfast is most gratifying. Clayton uses his fork for the scramble, but his fingers pluck at everything else and he seems completely at ease doing so.

Hannibal glances at Clayton between mouthfuls, slipping chunks of peach and pineapple between lips glistening with juice, alternating with bites of egg and sausage, licking fingers and lips without a second thought. Finally, he leans back and wipes a napkin across his face. He picks up a biscuit of biscotti and dips the anisette soaked confection into his cup of coffee before lifting it to his mouth. Hannibal imagines the sweet biscuit mingled with the smokiness of the dark roast coffee dissolving on his tongue and dunks one in his own coffee.

The house blend of coffee is exquisite. Hannibal savors the aroma beneath his nostrils as he sits in Clayton's peaceful and fragrant office.

"I smell flowers, orchids I think." Hannibal says.

"Behind you." Clayton points towards the door. "Every couple days, Maria brings in flowers from her garden. I usually bring in my own, but I slacked off this summer."

Clayton looks aside, to his right, clearly remembering something Hannibal thinks. Hannibal can't decide if the memory is a pleasant one or not. Clayton's expression is both wistful and serious.

Hannibal turns around to see fresh cut flowers setting in a tasteful crystal vase on the low console table near the door. The bouquet consists of only purple orchids and sunny yellow daisies, but the arrangement is lovely and the orchids are majestic.

"I have a garden as well. Living here, who could not?" Hannibal says, slipping a chunk of pineapple into his mouth.

"Anyone who actually lives in the city of Florence. You don't live far though if I remember."

"Impruneta. I grow the herbs you tasted in your breakfast."

"And what else? You don't grow just herbs, do you?'

"Some vegetables, and roses."

"Huh. So do I. Well usually. I've got to get out there and weed this weekend."

"Too hot?"

"Too busy. Anyway, I won't be enjoying any tomatoes or peppers if I don't pick them soon."

Hannibal turns his attention to the bookcases and nods at the rows of finely crafted wood shelves brimming with books and artifacts. His eyes are drawn to the collection of red figure Greek vases and plates and he stands to walk over to them, coffee in hand.

"These are reproductions, yes?"

"Of course, though they were made by local artists in Athens. I took a tour of the studio where they make them, all hand done and baked in a kiln. I didn't buy them all at once. A couple every time I went back."

"Impressive work. Wonderful that the craft is kept alive. These are all scenes from the Iliad?"

“Mostly. All of the pieces recall the Trojan War in some fashion. Like this one,” Daniel takes the plate bearing the sacrifice of Iphigenia down from the shelf. “This scene isn’t in the Iliad. It happens at the beginning.”

“Well, the true beginning of the war is debatable is it not?” Hannibal says taking the plate from Daniel’s hands to admire it more closely.

“Well, Iphigenia’s death sends the fleet to Troy. Appeases the gods so the Greeks have wind to sail. You’re referring to Helen?”

“Helen had a beginning, too. Every act of creation has its destructive consequence.”

“I suppose you can look at life that way. A rather polarizing perception.”

Daniel takes the plate gently from Hannibal’s hands to put back in its place. Words and phrases from conversations with Will tumble around his head as he thinks about Helen of Troy.

“Polarizing suggests division. Opposites are not always exclusive. Causal relationships need not be either. They can be…complimentary.”

“Restoring balance.” Daniel says still gazing at the plates.

Hannibal walks back to the couch and takes his seat. He is enjoying himself immensely. Clayton is positively delightful company. He thinks he should send Du Maurier some flowers to thank her.

Daniel trails back to his couch deep in thought. He reminds himself Victor is here for therapy not a philosophy seminar. Still, he thinks whatever a patient chooses to talk about can be revealing, especially this one. Daniel sees his coffee cup is empty and reaches for the thermos of the delicious Italian roast.

Hannibal leans to take a sip from his glass of orange juice at the same time and Clayton’s hand collides with Hannibal’s outstretched arm effectively emptying his juice and spilling it everywhere. The sudden crash of crystal and splashing of juice causes both men to freeze momentarily if only to let gravity take its course.

“Oh my god,” Daniel says, dropping to his knees at once directly in front of Victor, practically between his knees. He begins grabbing napkins from the table to stifle the flow of juice dripping off the table onto the formerly pristine Berber carpet. He notices Victor’s pants and shirt are now stained, too.

Hannibal remains frozen and…stunned. Numb. His eyes flutter in frustration and his heart stills.

No. It can’t be. Can it?

Will’s scent is all over Clayton. The musky sweetness Hannibal knows so well, so intimately , wafts upward from Clayton’s curly locks, from the exposed skin on the back of his neck, from his collar as he kneels dabbing at Hannibal’s shoes with napkins.

Hannibal’s nostrils flare with the memory of opening the door to his office to find Will standing there, promptly at seven, wearing new clothes, hair freshly cut. Only hours before he had been standing in Hannibal’s kitchen holding a gun to his face. A wisp of a smile had played about his lips and his eyes had been wide and clear as he had turned to face Hannibal.

Hello, Will.

May I come in?

Do you intend to point a gun at me?

Not tonight. Are you expecting someone?

Only you.

Will had breezed past him to take center stage in his office. The air had crackled between them and in Will's wake had trailed a new scent. He had changed his cologne. They had acknowledged a lot of changes that evening. Hannibal leans ever so slightly to catch another whiff.

He's wearing Will's cologne, too.

Hannibal's mind swims with the possibilities until he is drowning in them. He watches Clayton rise slowly from the carpet, his eyes wide as he looks into Hannibal's face.

Daniel is baffled by the rush of emotions he feels from Victor. There is such a muddled mixture of sensations throughout his body and skull he can't process them all. One thing is clear. This little spill just now precipitated something. Daniel thinks immediately that this simple accident must have triggered a memory in Victor. A memory he is reacting very strongly to. Daniel hopes he hasn't offended Victor.

He stands up quickly, thinking that perhaps he touched Victor inappropriately or something. Daniel is both embarrassed and confused. He can't seem to get a break with this patient. He wonders what else he can screw up this morning.

"I am so sorry, Victor. That was really clumsy. Your clothes…"

"Please. Accidents happen. I'll just drop these off at the dry cleaners."

Hannibal stands up, adjusts his shirt and glances over his jacket and trousers. There is minimal damage. Hardly noticeable from a distance. Hannibal is acutely aware the incident has unraveled Clayton's composure. Hannibal can take advantage of that.

"I'd insist on paying for it, but I get the feeling you would refuse." Daniel says.

"The gesture is appreciated. You'll forgive me for saying I find it amusing. It's not every day you see your psychiatrist on his knees between your legs."

Daniel's jaw drops in surprise at the comment. His neck feels warm as his mouth spreads into a grin and he can't help but chuckle. He is further surprised when Victor steps closer and reaches out a hand to adjust his tie and straighten his jacket. Daniel stands a little more erect, Victor's attentions are paternal yet oddly arousing at the same time.

"You changed your cologne."

"What?"

"You wore another fragrance before. You're wearing something different."

“Am I?”

Daniel sniffs at his collar and closes his eyes remembering his crazy rushed morning thanks to Will. He had rolled out of bed and had scrambled to get ready, pulling on the articles of clothing that matched before running down the steps. He had not even finished his coffee.

“Oh, I must have grabbed the wrong bottle this morning.”

“Wrong bottle?”

“Yeah. I have a roommate. I must have splashed on his cologne by mistake.”

“An easy enough mistake to make if you share a bedroom.” Hannibal says, dropping his hands from Daniel’s perfectly symmetrical tie.

Daniel feels hot all over. He thinks his morning cannot possibly get any worse.

The slight flush about Daniel’s cheeks and the tremulous biting on his lower lip tells Hannibal all he needs to know. Well, not all. Hannibal glances at his watch. His session with Clayton is not yet over. A half an hour remains and Hannibal intends to make the most of it. Clayton may, or may not, understand or know what he has involved himself in, but it does not matter. He is in the thick of it.

For now, Clayton has no idea who he is and Hannibal will take advantage of that, too. Hannibal can finally send his invitation. Amended to include a guest, of course.

Will is in Fiesole. And Fiesole is where Hannibal will be this afternoon.

Daniel gestures towards the couches realizing they have some time left. Victor feels more relaxed to Daniel now, more like a breeze and less like a typhoon. Daniel finds it odd that such visceral emotions have practically evaporated from Victor. The shift was quick as though Victor had shut a door in his mind.

Thinking it best if he allows his patient to guide their discussion today, Daniel opens his notebook and writes a brief entry about their breakfast. As he writes, he notices Victor cleaning up the coffee table, carefully cleaning plates and putting everything back in the totes. Literally everything. Scraps and all.

“Victor, I can do that. You don’t have to clean up.”

Daniel watches his patient compulsively fold the tablecloth in thirds and then thirds again before placing it in the tote.

“I insist. Compost for the garden.”

Daniel makes another note in his patient log. He waits until Victor has cleaned and arranged everything to his satisfaction and is once again reclining on the couch.

“I had an agenda for today, but I thought I’d ask if there’s anything you’d like to talk about first.”

Hannibal’s eyes roam over Clayton, appreciating the beauty of him, the intelligence and the kindness, and appreciating his intentions most of all. Sadly, Clayton cannot have what belongs to him. Hannibal sighs, but manages a weak smile.

“I think I would like to talk about regret.”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's published paper referenced here is titled Evolutionary Origins of Social Inclusion and was likely based on Kurzban and Leary's "Evolutionary Origins of Stigmatization"
A great link for a Hannibal Reading List
http://elucipher.tumblr.com/post/81332684618/what-would-you-suggest-for-a-hannibal-reading

Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Hannibal takes a drive to Fiesole. Will has a conference call with Jack…and Mason.

“Jack…who else knows you pulled me out of protective custody, besides Zee who has clearly been sworn to secrecy, and Mason and...well, Margot?”

“No one. As we agreed.”

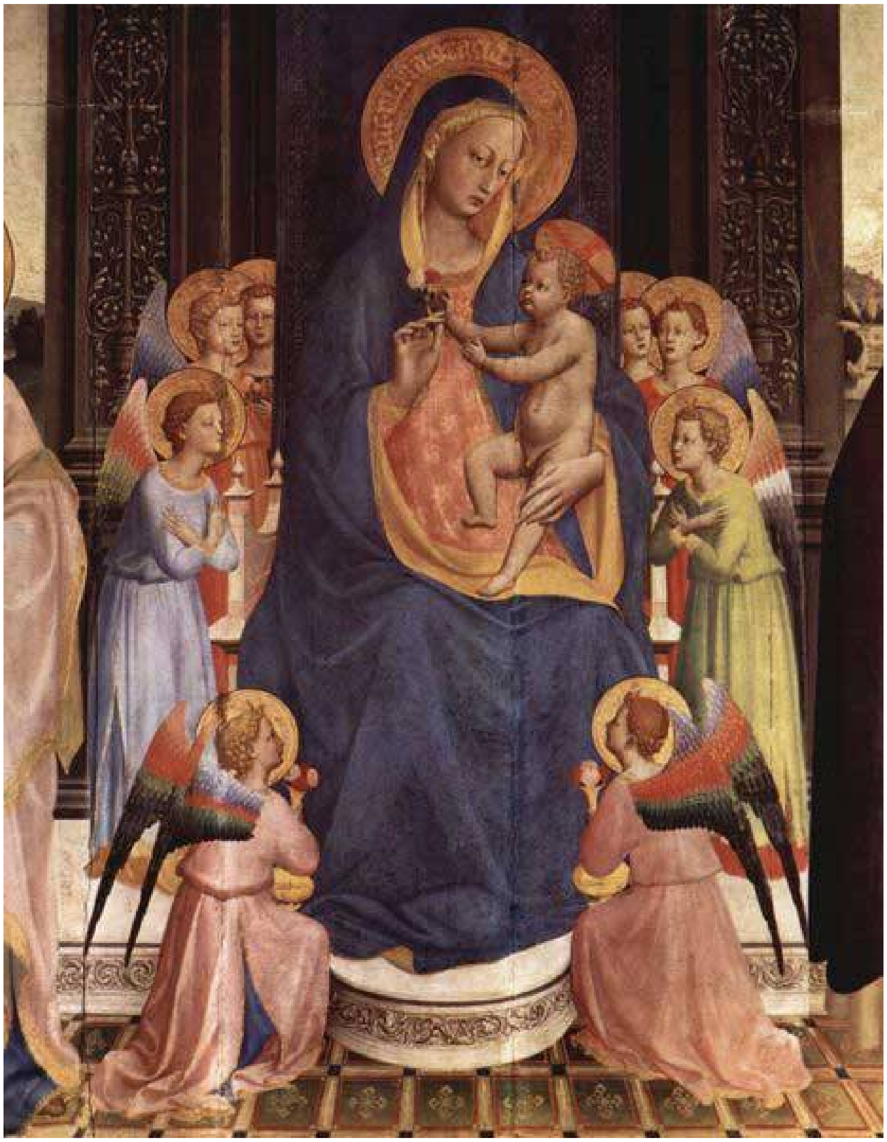
“And what happens if something happens to me?”

Jack sits back in his chair, folds his hands together in a pyramid. The angry glint in his eyes melts away, his expression gentled by Will’s question, and he looks at Will in a way he has not in very long time. He purses his lips and lowers his eyes, an approximation of an apology. But not quite.

“What happened between you, Hannibal, and Verger?”

Chapter 54

Hannibal takes a drive to Fiesole. Will has a conference call with Jack…and Mason.



Virgin and Child with Saints.   Fra Angelico,Fiesole, Italy.

Hannibal guides his Jaguar around the next turn, and continues to climb the hills of Fiesole, taking a leisurely route around the terraces and walls that line its streets. Some of the brick walls are as old as Fiesole itself, remnants of the labors of their Etruscan ancestors. Hannibal has made a point of reading up on the little town's history. He feels an almost intimate familiarity with it now; as he does Florence.

One never knows when the occasion may arise that requires intimate knowledge of a place particularly its design. Hannibal trusts his instincts and his memory far more than any device. The GPS sits unplugged in the console, its constant babble a distraction and its tendency to misidentify streets insufferable.

Hannibal had disconnected it upon arriving at Fiesole's town limits marked by the crumbling ruins of fortifications razed centuries ago by the Byzantine army, a battle the Romans lost in 529, surrendering Fiesole to the invaders. Later, Roman Catholics would take it back and the little town is the birthplace of Fra Angelico, a devout and gifted monk, whose precious and beautiful devotional paintings hang in the Uffizi and in many churches all over Italy. Hannibal finds it yet another travesty that many of his frescoes at the convent in Fiesole did not survive Italy's violent history.

As Hannibal heads toward the pinnacle of Fiesole he turns up the stereo and hums to Mozart's *Andante, Piano concerto No. 21*. Hannibal needs no device to tell him where the top of a hill is. Tatiana had assured Hannibal there was nothing wrong with his GPS, but the device has managed to exceed Hannibal's patience on too many occasions. Now that it rests silent in his console, Hannibal doubts he will connect it again.

Hannibal is reminded of another circumstance involving his distrust of similar devices.

Hannibal remembers every blissful morning he awakened to Will in his bed. Hannibal nearly always awakened first, and on the morning following their dinner with Alana, and their conversation regarding Lounds, Hannibal had opened his eyes to dark curls framing a familiar face in profile, soft pink lips parted in resplendent repose.

Will had not made mention of Alana Bloom again that night, but Hannibal knows the satin sheets twisting around him while Hannibal had pummeled him into the mattress had seared his relentless imagination with images of the nights before, when Alana had been the one twisting in the same sheets. Those were likely associations Will could not fling into a fort quickly enough.

The sex had been akin to madness between them and satisfying their urges had sent Will straight to sleep, a soundless slumber unspoiled by thoughts of Lounds or the FBI. As distant as those thoughts might have been that night, they had returned with a vengeance the next morning.

Will's phone had gone off on the night stand and Will's eyes had fluttered open as his hand had grasped it tightly, eyes squinting in the dim morning light to read the caller id. After staring at his phone for a couple seconds he had set it back down and had turned on his side toward Hannibal, eyes closed and grumbling into the pillow.

"Wrong number?" Hannibal had said plucking at curls.

Will had opened one eye long enough to check Hannibal's expression before closing it again.

"Jack." The one word reply had been mumbled into the pillow.

"It's half past six. What do you think he wanted?" Hannibal had asked, wondering if Alana had phoned Jack after leaving.

"No idea. He'll call back."

"Will, does Jack have a habit of calling this early?"

"Not habitually, but if he's on his way into Quantico…"

"And do you always take his calls?"

Will had sighed and rolled his eyes. "Um…yeah. Maybe I should have picked up."

"Do you think he suspects you are here?"

"Huh? No…I don't think so. Why would he?"

“We had an interesting conversation with Alana last night. Would Jack be concerned about your whereabouts?”

“Concerned enough to take a drive out to my house? No.”

“Then my house? I live closer to Jack than you do.”

Will had sat up, stretching stiff arms over his head. He had cracked his neck and then cocked his head to one side, his expression grim or annoyed. It was hard to tell with Will.

“I didn’t see Alana leave, but I got the impression she would have been quite happy to stay. Being alone with you didn’t seem to bother her.”

“Nor should it. But she might have feared for Lounds.”

Or thought Jack should know Will accepts tender embraces from Hannibal in front of huge windows.

“Sounds like transference to me, doctor.” Will had bit the inside of his cheek, but had smiled in spite of himself. “Isn’t paranoia a textbook trait of a psychopath?”

“Among other things…”

Hannibal’s eyes had roamed over Will’s exposed limbs and torso alighting on the bruise at his collarbone. Will had raised a brow, eyes down to see what Hannibal had focused on. Will had lifted his eyes back up slowly, teeth pinching his lower lip, a parody of chastisement.

The unspoken intimacy between them had seemed so natural, that Hannibal cannot bring himself to believe Will’s demonstrations contrived or calculated. Yes, Will’s gift could allow him to fabricate a version of himself that Hannibal would find irresistible, but the unsolicited slips of affection had been spontaneous. Hadn’t they?

Hannibal had found Will’s teasing endearing that morning. He was rarely playful, and certainly not upon waking up. In hindsight, at that point, Will had felt reasonably secure about his status with Jack, believed he had Jack’s trust. Believed Jack had his back after Tier, perhaps reluctantly, but Jack had backed off. And, he had wanted Alana out of the equation regardless. To Will’s thinking, if Alana had doubts she might avoid the both of them.

Will’s confidence had folded with the provocative observation Hannibal had presented next.

“If not drive out to your home, it is possible he had someone place tracking devices on your car. I seem to remember something about remote GPS tracking from the Silvestri case.”

Will eyes had opened wide at the mention of the Silvestri case. Dear departed Beverly had cleverly tracked the medical student’s ambulance where he had been performing his organ harvesting. Will had sat up rubbed at his face and glanced again at his phone.

“No…the ambulance had GPS installed in it. My car has nothing like that. I don’t even have a GPS app for my phone let alone my car.”

“It would be easy to attach one though. Without your knowledge.”

Will had looked at Hannibal, mouth open and jaw slack as he had considered the suggestion.

“You think Jack’s tailing me? That he’s tracked me here and called for what? To see if I would lie about it? That makes no sense. He would expect me to lie assuming you could hear me. If I had picked up…” Will had paused, “But why would I be here at…six twenty in the morning.”

“Precisely.”

Will had sighed, deeply and Hannibal had watched him retreat into his head. Hannibal’s fingers along his collarbone had brought him back quickly enough.

“You’re right. That makes no sense. We are assuming Jack called to ask where you were and it is unlikely that is why he called. But if he should inquire later about your whereabouts this morning or why you didn’t pick up, what will you think?”

“I think I’ll check my car after coffee. And yours, too.”

Hannibal had successfully implanted brand new seeds of doubt into Will’s consciousness. Weaning Will away from Jack and the FBI had been necessary for Will’s becoming. Hannibal had known that with every kill, a piece of Will would die. And from death he would be reborn. Eventually, Jack would have no choice but to pursue both of them and they would have to flee Baltimore… together.

Hannibal remembers the conversation with Jack over the Ukranian *Kholodets* dinner. Hannibal had prepared the dish to provoke. He had not been disappointed.

If you can't rely on others, you have to rely on God.

I'm relying on myself. And yet in this moment, I have to confess that I don't know who's pursuing whom any more than these fish do.

Hannibal thinks Jack had been revealing more than he had meant to. Jack had been implying that he agreed with Alana’s belief that Will had killed Freddie Lounds. A perfectly reasonable thing for Jack to say that evening. Jack was saying he wasn’t sure if Will had killed her, or not. A confession that he wasn’t certain he wasn’t being lied to. A statement designed to make Hannibal feel secure.

Looking back, Hannibal thinks Jack had subconsciously been confessing his doubts. He had been alluding to Will and Hannibal. On some level, Jack had perceived an affinity between them that consciously, he was not prepared to entertain, let alone accept. Hannibal’s dish of fish captured in gelatin like a moment frozen in time had offered Jack more food for thought than Hannibal had imagined.

At the time, he had had no idea that Jack and Will were working together to catch him, but he does now. Hannibal had understood that Jack would have had his concerns about Will, had thought that Jack was applauding Will’s efforts to move beyond his accusations and had approved of his return to therapy.

That their efforts had been coordinated had not occurred to Hannibal. Will had convincingly painted Jack as a sort of paternal figure, indulging his prized but damaged profiler, but only to a point. To his credit, Jack had played his role well.

But, Will had apparently resumed his therapy with dual purpose.

To get closer to Hannibal not only for Jack, but for himself. Though Will would not have admitted that to himself at the time. Will lied to himself all the time.

The thought that Jack might have bugged his car would have been rejected, vehemently so, if Will had been securely singular in his own intentions. He had not been secure. Hannibal's suggestion had unsettled him. While Will was capable of analyzing and assimilating Hannibal's thoughts, and might have been playing into Hannibal's concerns most of the time, Hannibal doubts Will had anticipated this particular conversation, not this early in the morning. Hannibal believes Will's response had been genuine.

Will had not been merely concerned, but alarmed, for a few seconds, that Jack might not believe he was pretending with Hannibal. After Tier, Will had raised serious doubts in Jack about his state of mind, if not his mind then his perspective. Will had wrestled with doubt about himself. Will had been conflicted even then and the idea that Jack might know he was conflicted and had bugged his car to keep tabs on his broken pony had seemed plausible to him. And it shouldn't have.

If things had been going smoothly between Will and Jack, Will would not have spent the next hour and a half going over both of their vehicles in twenty degree weather.

He had watched Will examine both of their vehicles, holding a hot cup of coffee to warm his hands. The coffee had cooled almost immediately as the morning frost had penetrated his cup. After rubbing his hands together, flexing fingers numb with cold despite the thick gloves, Will had shrugged as pale blue eyes had swept over the Bentley one more time.

"Satisfied?" Hannibal had asked.

"As much as I can be."

Will had stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the kitchen door. There had been only two steps, but the distance and the angle had apparently placed Will in what he had perceived as a subordinate position. He had stood with one foot on the concrete and the other on the step, impatiently glowering at Hannibal to move.

Hannibal had gazed down at him, allowing his lips to curve slightly at the challenge. The tiny tic of his mouth had drawn the hoped for response.

"It's cold." Will had said, lifting his head a little more.

"Yes, I need to tidy up. Change the sheets…"

Will's eyes had narrowed to slits. "For the record, I am not…jealous."

"Of course you aren't."

"I've accepted that Alana…that we are never going to be intimately involved."

"No, but in a way, you already have."

Will had looked aside, pressing lips together in a thin line, muscles twitching along his jaw. Hannibal had watched his Adam's apple bob slowly as he had swallowed down the ball of bile in his throat. When he had turned his pale blue eyes back to Hannibal, the frost on the railing had seemed less frigid.

“It’s cold.” Will had repeated.

Hannibal had turned to open the kitchen door and had held it open for Will to pass through first. Will had brazenly stalked past him, thrown his gloves on the kitchen table and unbuttoned his long tweed coat. And there he had stood, back to the door, motionless head to the side to watch Hannibal’s approach.

Hannibal had followed him in, removed his gloves and coat, and had stood by the door waiting to see if Will would also remove his jacket, or button it back up and storm out.

Will had turned around from the table, slipping his coat ever so slowly from off his shoulders as his eyes had moved from Hannibal’s shoes to his face. Graceful. Predatory. Almost feline.

“Any coffee left?” he had asked, favoring Hannibal with duck of his head and a teasing smile. So infuriating, his Will.

When Will had inquired about the missed call, Jack had dismissively told him to forget about it.

Hannibal thinks this episode had weighed upon Will’s mind as he had watched Freddie Lounds snoop around his property. Images of sitting again on a dirty mattress at BSHCI while Hannibal sat in his office must have figured prominently in his decision to silence Lounds temporarily rather than permanently. Will’s empathy allowed him to think like Hannibal, absorb Hannibal into his very being. Will might have forgotten that his mind had absorbed Uncle Jack, too. Will unconsciously absorbs everything.

The problem Will has is too many mirror neurons. Our heads are filled with them when we are children, supposed to help us socialize and then melt away. But Will held on to his, which makes knowing who he is a challenge. When you take him to a crime scene, Jack, the very air has screams smeared on it. In those places, he doesn't just reflect; He absorbs.

Will has evidently been absorbing a lot lately. Absorbing a lot from Clayton, his psychiatrist. Their psychiatrist. The irony. Pity, thinks Hannibal. What a wondrous experiment it would be to see how long each of them could keep Clayton dancing on a tightrope between them. A pity that Hannibal cannot risk the exposure.

Hannibal glances again at Clayton’s address before eyeing the GPS with disdain. He has never required technology to find anything before. Hannibal will see Will today because he wishes it so.

He drives up and around the rolling hills exploring the terrace lined streets entirely to the music of Mozart, pieces selected especially for this singular experience. Hannibal has the time to explore. He has no plans on paying Will a visit just yet. It is far more advantageous to observe. Will may be alone at the house right now, but not for much longer. He knows Clayton will return home soon. Hannibal would.

For as small as it is, Fiesole is a thriving town, its prosperity tied to its strategic location and proximity to Florence. It’s enviable affluence the result of traders, travelers, and tourists over the centuries. A prized piece of real estate indeed. Hannibal can imagine Rome’s forces amassing along its hills to gaze down upon the city that had so often proved a thorn in many a pope’s side. From these hilltops one can see vineyards and orchards for miles.

Hannibal reaches the crest of the city’s uppermost hill where the Museo Bandini is located. He pulls into a parking spot in one of the lots in the park that surrounds the archaeological site. He takes a moment to envy what must be Clayton's view every time he walks his dogs up here. The ruins of the amphitheater below vie with one's attention for the lush gardens that surround the museum above. Clayton spends as much time with his dogs as someone else he knows. How utterly perfect.

Clayton had been happy to converse about his canines with Hannibal. Prompted by Hannibal's questions, he had talked as much about the trained dogs he uses in his therapy as his own. In his haste to get to his office before his patient, he had not cleaned his cream colored trousers of his pets' assault as he had left his house, and enough dog hair and dander had adhered to the fabric to arouse one's allergies if one were so disposed.

Of course, there had been other less innocuous evidence clinging to Clayton this morning, which is why Hannibal finds himself staring down into the ruins of the Teatro Romano in Fiesole this afternoon.

He had driven back to Impruneta after his appointment this morning, leaving the flustered Clayton to deal with his other patients. Clayton will not be at his office all day. He is probably on his way back already.

Clayton had already explained to Hannibal that he had cut his office hours back, and at the time Hannibal had thought Du Maurier's patient, Lydia the reason for Clayton's scaled back scheduling. Hannibal cannot fault Clayton for allowing Will to monopolize his practice. Neither can he fault him for being late on account of Will. Hannibal cannot fault him for any of it. And yet he finds his jaws tight as his hands clench the steering wheel.

Hannibal knows the scent of sex. It is organic and earthy; a mixture of sweat, fluids both acidic and alkaline, and the residue emanates an odor as recognizable as decomposition. Hannibal supposes in a way it is. Semen is alive. And as it dries sticky and sweet upon the skin it dies, imparting a specific smell, unique to each individual.

Will's sexual scent is very specific and Hannibal's familiarity with it extends to every one of his senses. Will may as well have signed his name along Clayton's throat. That signature scent had held Hannibal captive, so that had he closed his eyes and run his tongue across Clayton's exposed neck, he would have tasted Will in all his salty sweetness as surely as if he had been kneeling before him.

Hannibal's fingers twitch at the steering wheel, his hands grasp the smooth leather and he thinks of his hands grasping the smooth handle of that linoleum knife seconds before sinking its blade into smooth perfect flesh. Tea cup shattered and the shards are so very sharp. Hannibal has cut them both.

It is not Clayton's fault he is now the salt in Hannibal's wound. Hannibal had found him worthy of a second chance at life. Hannibal takes a deep cleansing breath and feels the bitter scraping across his wound subside. Had he let Clayton die, he would not have found Will. Du Maurier's scheming would have taken another form, and she would know about Will and Hannibal would not. All things considered, Hannibal cannot begrudge Clayton his association with Will. As a psychiatrist, Clayton would have found Will fascinating. Fascination led to desire. Hannibal can identify with that.

Hannibal remembers many chilly evenings looking into his appointment book, his eyes riveted to one name among all the others. The name written into the last line in Hannibal's own elegant hand had summoned the familiar anticipation he feels now.

Will…

The longing has wound its way through his chest and limbs, threading through sinew and bone, the need to hold, to touch tortures him, unleashed and unabated since his senses had been overcome with Will's scent clinging to Clayton this morning as it had once cleaved to his own skin and clothing. The throb of the open wound as inseparable from his existence as the beating of his heart.

Hannibal would have liked to have driven to Fiesole directly from Florence this morning, but the status of his current guests demanded his return to Impruneta before indulging his curiosity in Fiesole. Returning home immediately after his appointment had been his original intention this morning and assurance of his guests' continued circumstances must be maintained.

Leaving the Paolini twins unattended all day would be unwise. All of his preparations are about to coalesce culminating in a composition of epic design. Orchestrations of carbon, melodies synchronized once again, point and counterpoint.

Before leaving Florence he had taken the time to stop at a florist shop to arrange a special delivery for Du Maurier.

Hannibal had hand selected only the darkest of red roses in the shop, the petals crimson velvet upon his fingertips, bringing to mind the very essence of the blood and lust that will surely flow. Every creative act has its destructive consequence, and Du Maurier cannot escape the consequences of her own actions.

It is clear to Hannibal that she has known about Will for some time. Hannibal thinks it impossible that she does not. She has been courting Clayton for weeks. Hannibal thinks it likely Du Maurier set Will's palazzo on fire to force him to move elsewhere, someplace far from the Palazzo Pitti and the Vasari Corridor where Hannibal spends his days in Florence.

Her frequent visits to Fiesole must have precipitated a chance meeting with Clayton, whose resemblance to Will must have been jarring enough. Her curiosity piqued, she had investigated him further, leading to the discovery of his association with Will. Believing it only a matter of time until Will and Hannibal crossed paths she had orchestrated her own symphony of subterfuge, creating a situation of convenience.

The sympathetic and smitten Clayton had insisted his displaced patient stay with him. Du Maurier could keep them both under surveillance while attending to her patient, the likelihood of Will crossing paths with Hannibal greatly reduced. Du Maurier had effectively rendered even Clayton's office useless.

Du Maurier does not spend so much time at the winery and estate for her patient's sake. Discovering Will in Florence, knowing a reunion between them imminent and unavoidable, she decided to cut and run. Her greatest fear is that Hannibal will find Will, or that Will will locate Hannibal before the transfer of assets. Hannibal must allay those fears for her.

Hannibal considers her words and actions, stitches them together in his mind until a tapestry of intentions begins to emerge. Clayton is a weapon pointed at both ends. One end draws memories like blood from Hannibal and the other is poised to reopen the wound Will carries.

Whatever her plan is, it requires Will's presence to remain secret until all her pieces are in place upon the board. What a devious queen Du Maurier has become. She thinks to rid herself of all three of them, capture the code like a flag, and fly off to Switzerland to claim the spoils of conquest.

Hannibal thinks upon the satisfied smile that will spread across her lips as she opens his gift of blood red roses. His token card of gratitude for her thoughtful introduction of the charming Clayton into Hannibal's otherwise routine existence should dispel a few of the fretful clouds hovering over her horizon.

Hannibal will allow her to set her pieces unobstructed. At least until the twins make an appearance on the news. Then, their game of chess will truly begin. Hannibal will advance across the board removing each of her pieces one by one, until the queen stands alone.

Hannibal turns off the ignition and steps out, popping the trunk as he does. He exchanges his button down shirt for a pale loose tee in the parking lot, nodding at the appreciative smiles of the two women standing at their car admiring him. He dons a faded blue baseball cap and adjusts the jeans that fit snugly if not uncomfortably. Walking around Fiesole as an anonymous tourist necessitates a change of wardrobe.

He slips his phone into the right front pocket of his jeans and tucks the slim wallet into a back pocket.

The walk to Via Fra Giovanni where Clayton resides should take about half an hour. Hannibal will find a secluded place nearby from which to observe, just like Du Maurier must have done. Ironies abound, but it is upon Hannibal's shoulders that Fate descends as surely as the sun sets behind him.

Will sits in front of Daniel's laptop his finger poised over the mouse as he contemplates hitting send. The e-mail is to Jack and Will knows that hitting send will trigger a series of events that once set in motion, will again spiral beyond and out of his control. He is also acutely aware of what will happen if he does not.

He glances at the old mantel clock over the fireplace. The scratched glass and embossed Roman numerals remind him of another clock with the same dark wood framing the same round face in the center but a coating of dust from disuse had stuck to Will's old mantle clock. His clock had been lodged in his bookcase, its electric cord tucked behind it because it had finally stopped working after travelling with Will since he had left home.

When he looks at Daniel's clock he is invariably taken back to the day he had reluctantly unplugged it, thinking he would take the old heirloom with him next time he went into Baltimore; or to Quantico, drop it off and get it repaired. He had never gotten around to it. He thinks it portentous that the mantel clock he had dragged around with him since college had stopped working the day before Jack Crawford had stepped into his classroom to borrow his imagination.

Will rereads his message, finger still hovering over the mouse and decides the wording is precise, conveying facts without the clutter of adjectives or adverbs that might suggest how Will *feels* about the message. He adds Mason, always ensuring both Mason and Jack have the same traceable information so that neither Jack nor Mason has an advantage over the other, at least not from Will. However Mason intends to exact his revenge, keeping Jack informed provides Will with some insurance that Mason will have to step carefully around Jack to pull it off.

Just because Mason is bankrolling their clandestine enterprise does not mean that Jack will allow Mason to call the shots. Will can depend on Jack to keep Mason on edge. Jack is very good at that.

Will imagines that his lack of contact has prompted quite a bit of speculation between the two of them, each of them tip toeing around the other trying to determine how much the other knows, without arousing suspicions as to intentions. Jack is suspicious of Mason and Mason is contemptuous of Jack and of the FBI in general. Mason has never deviated from his account of his accident and Jack had known better than to ask Will about it. Jack understands the practicality of plausible deniability, particularly where Hannibal and Will are concerned.

Will would have loved to have seen Jack's deniability in action when he'd finally been subjected to the debriefing after his release from the hospital. Will can imagine the look on Kade Purnell's face as Jack had tried to navigate through the voluminous evidence and forensic reports on Hannibal's home and office. Entrapment could not hold a candle to the implications and correlations between the human remains in the fridge, Hannibal's recipe box and rolodex of business cards, and the staggering number of dinner invitations. Will has to wonder how Jack explained dining with Hannibal knowing full well what was likely on the menu. And how does someone like Purnell, Inspector General of FBI Oversight, even phrase the question?

So Jack, did you know you were eating people to entrap Doctor Lecter?

Purnell would not put it past Will, but Jack?

Jack had apparently not sat comatose through his psych evaluations. He still has a job.

Purnell now knows the breadth and scope of Hannibal's pathology. She knows that it was Hannibal who had murdered the judge presiding over Will's case, not Matthew Brown. When Hannibal's testimony had failed to sway the judge toward an acquittal, Hannibal had left him swinging from the rafters, delivering his own suspended sentence and settling for a mistrial instead. Will has imagined many times the sight that must have cost Purnell her breakfast that morning.

Thanks to the abundance of forensic evidence at his home and office, she also has no doubt as to source of Hannibal's tantrum. Purnell had found Will contemptible before the events at 5 Chandal Square. She had been unable to cloak her contempt afterward. Will had cringed inside the entire time he had endured her brief visit at the hospital. If Purnell had her druthers, Will would never see the light of day again, except from between bars.

Do you believe in miracles, Mr. Graham? Because when we catch him, and we will catch him; it will be a miracle if you avoid a padded room.

Will is well aware that Jack cannot guarantee the promised immunity from future prosecution. This is partly because of Purnell and partly because there is no guarantee that Will's actions won't place the FBI under scrutiny once again. There is already a chalked figure of him drawn beneath the proverbial bus the FBI will surely throw him under should he fail to exercise the requisite restraint and decorum this time.

Kade Purnell may have to shift her rigid perspective once Hannibal displays the twins in another morbid tableau. She will be desperate for Jack to bring Hannibal in, or kill him, if only to salvage relations between Interpol and the FBI. The FBI's inability to capture one well-heeled serial killing cannibal has raised eyebrows and smiles among European law enforcement. They will continue to smile until Hannibal goes a-hunting in their backyard.

Then, they will want Jack's crazy damaged bloodhound on the case. They will wink while the mongoose goes after the snake. And Will will no longer be on his own as he is now. He will be under relentless surveillance because no one really wants Lecter's love interest to actually catch him. Jack certainly does not want Will alone with Hannibal. They only want Will to lead them to him. Neither the FBI nor Interpol knows what Hannibal might do to him; or what Will might do with Hannibal.

Will hits send, and his fingers recoil immediately as though the mere touch of skin to smooth plastic sent an electric current through him. He cradles his head in his hands, massaging his temples and scalp until the thoughts begin to recede from his consciousness. He can feel his mind detaching from a reality that leaves him cold and numb inside, casting off from the shore to float away, and too wearied to contemplate the consequences another minute.

To the truth then. And all its consequences.

The hour and minute hands of the clock form a single arrow, pointing to twelve and Will wonders where the morning went. The last couple hours have passed quickly since Daniel flew out of bed, swearing as he had run down the stairs. Will had lain in bed and had laughed out loud listening to him fumble around the kitchen, dogs at his heels, still swearing loudly, this time about *somebody* moving his car keys from the top of the fridge.

Daniel had suggested Will engage in some yard work today, perhaps mow the lawn if he were so inclined since the forecast was calling for rain this weekend. A little manual labor would dislodge the disquieting dread that constricts like a noose around his throat every time he thinks about the twins, for a little while. Will clicks on the browser to check the weather. If the forecast does not call for rain this weekend, Will can occupy his mind with something other than cutting grass. He should have taken out the lawn mower earlier, before noontime. Now, the yard is baking under the hot Tuscan sun, humidity so thick, Will thinks steamed clams would be less sticky.

As the local forecast comes up on the screen, Will notices the toolbar flicker as the webcam is activated. As he wonders what he touched on the laptop to cause the damn thing to turn on, the image of Jack Crawford sitting at his desk pops up in a window. Will groans inwardly but clicks to make the image larger and he sees Zeller standing next to Jack's chair, hands still flitting over the keyboard as Jack grimaces behind him.

"He's there, I got him, Jack." Zeller says.

"I can see that." Jack says, "So what are you doing now?"

"Adjusting the audio. I don't hear anything…"

"Because he's not saying anything. Will?"

"Yes, Jack."

Will's teeth find his lower lip, drawing the flesh slowly into his mouth. He had not expected the consequences to catch up to him so soon.

"Oh…right." Zeller says, "Hey Will."

Zeller waves, a pleasant smile on his face. Will rubs at temples already pulsing and Jack hasn't even said anything to him yet. He smiles wanly at Zeller who at least looks happy to see him.

"Hello, Zee."

“You finished catching up?” Jack says from his chair.

“Uh, yeah…you’re good to go Jack.” Zeller shrugs at Will.

“Wonderful. Then why the fuck are you still here?”

Will waits for Zeller to clear the room. He hears the door to Jack’s office slam shut as Jack leans forward in his chair, hands folded on the top of his cluttered desk. The raised scar along his neck where Hannibal had stabbed his jugular with broken glass is visible above the collar of his wrinkled shirt. Will’s eyes are drawn to it, and he imagines again the struggle that preceded it. He closes his eyes until the images recede. *We all carry scars from him, don’t we, Jack.*

Jack’s suit jacket is as wrinkled as his shirt and it hangs from shoulders, bowed with fatigue. Will thinks he has lost some weight. Will decides he is a man in mourning still, thoughts of Bella never far from his mind. Will notes the picture frame turned around behind Jack, but he knows whose face graces the photograph.

Will observes the lines of age carved around Jack’s mouth, the creases around and between his eyes, made more prominent from the artificial light that seems to suck the lustrous brown from his complexion, causing his skin to appear more sallow than Will knows it to be.

Jack stares at him wide eyed and unblinking. Will thinks of dead fish and looks aside. Gesturing to the files and papers on Jack’s desk, Will clears his throat.

“Keeping you busy?” Will says, trying to be sociable.

“The criminals or my superiors?” Jack snaps.

Will fights the urge to sink his teeth into his lip. He straightens up in his chair, forcing himself to behave how Jack would prefer him to behave. He considers a moment what exactly that might look like. He decides instead to give Jack what he expects.

“Just say what’s on your mind, Jack. No need to put on gloves with me.”

The smallest of tweaks tug at the corner of Jack’s mouth. He glances down at a paper on his desk.

“So, I received your email. I don’t hear from you for weeks and now this?”

“I can’t help what turns up. But the Paolini have been incommunicado for too long. Something’s up.”

“I concur. And so does Mason Verger. I spoke to him earlier. I’m going to include him in our conference call, right now.”

Will opens his mouth to protest but shuts it again. He steels himself to the inevitable and waits for Mason to appear on the split screen. He averts his eyes as Mason’s face, or what remains of it appears next to Jack’s. The lighting isn’t any better where Mason is, Will decides.

“Mr. Graham.” The sound grates, memories threaten and Will presses his fingernails into the palms of his hands, “You’re looking healthy and handsome these days. Is that a suntan?” Mason’s voice crackles over the speakers, irritating as always.

You must be the baby daddy…I'm going to feed you to my pigs…I'm full of myself…My face is cold…

"Mr. Verger." Will nods vaguely at the camera.

Verger's patched and scarred face does not move, but his cold blue eyes do. They search Will's face for several seconds as Jack sits rubbing at his. Will thinks again of dead fish, of pale translucent flesh exposed between slit scales peeled back in layers. Of Saran wrap on raw blood drenched tissue…

"You know, you are *so* attractive Mr. Graham. You should think about making babies with somebody. Imagine what lovely children you would spawn."

"Sire." Will says, "You meant, sire."

Jack sits quietly, eyes blinking and a confused expression on his face. He glances up at Will who catches his eyes and shrugs slightly.

"Oh, of course I did. Ha! Now…about my employees. You lost them in France, I believe."

"I didn't lose them. But they do appear to be lost. And I am certain they made it back to Italy, maybe back to Florence."

"To Florence."

"If Lecter has them, then he knows who sent them. He knows you are here in the states with the money, and he knows I am in Florence waiting for the twins. Did they send you any information?"

"No. They said the files would have to be scanned. All…old stuff. No electronic files."

"They told me the same thing. I only received tax documents and property deeds from Lithuania."

Will watches Mason roll his tongue over the rolled skin that passes for lips. The image of what Mason looked like before he cut off his face in strips with Papa's knife appears ghostlike beneath the scarred flesh. Will cannot make the image go away no matter how hard he tries.

Will thinks Daniel may be on to something. His mind invariably remains in the past, unable to grapple with the present, so it retreats to a time when it could. Perhaps.

"I find it…oddly convenient how they are lost and you are not. Explain to me why…you weren't with them."

Will imagines a different Mason, walking along scaffolding, arms gesturing wildly, in love with the sound of his own voice…

"Should I have been?" Will says.

"Well, Luciano said you would be going with them."

"Did Luciano actually say that, or did he imply it?"

"The exact wording of our conversation escapes me… Why?"

“Well, it makes a difference if Luciano outright lied or if you just heard it wrong.”

“I suppose…”

“You could have contacted me anytime. You didn’t.” Will says.

“You didn’t contact me either.”

“But that is nothing out of the ordinary. Luciano usually talks to you, sometimes Lucia.”

“Will, tell us what you said to the twins before they left.” Jack rubs along his eyebrows. Listening to Mason was like listening to fingernails on a chalkboard.

“I suggested the trip to Lithuania. Luciano said he and Lucia were up for it. He said he would clear it with you. You’re the money. Next I hear from him, they have already landed in Lithuania.”

“I pay you to work together.” Mason says.

Drool pools in the corner of his mouth. A thick hairy hand, attached to a nurse Will hopes, appears on the screen with a towel to dab at Mason’s mouth and the folds of skin that approximate lips, but the grafting it seems, is not working out so well. Will can’t find it within himself to feel anything as he stares at the pale patchwork of sutures and scarring that covers the bottom half of Mason’s face like a road map.

Check that. Will does feel something. His lips part slightly as he silently thinks he loathes Mason.

“And we do, or did. I could have gone with them…”

“Mr. Verger, I think it just as well that Will didn’t go, don’t you?” Jack says.

Mason pauses to suck on a straw his hairy handed nurse has stuck between teeth. Will and Jack wait while Mason wets his throat which must be constantly dry given his mouth never really closes. Ever. Will watches his tongue wriggle around and finally click against the roof of his mouth as the nurse withdraws the straw, a disgusting sticky sound. Will’s stomach turns.

“What was I saying? Oh yes…working together. Agent Crawford, what…is the recommended protocol in this situation?”

“There is no protocol for this. Not where Lecter is concerned. I would like to talk to Will about his recommendations and after considering all the angles, I will get back to you and let you know what I decide. If you have nothing more to add, of course.”

Mason rolls his eyes up in his head, apparently searching for something else to add. Will wonders if Mason realizes his attic has already been cleaned and cleared out. Nobody home… Vacant but for the maliciousness that remains, corrosive and eating him alive from the inside out.

Mason clicks his tongue a couple times, “No…I guess not. Seems you are very lucky, Mr. Graham.”

“Oh, I am far from lucky.” Will says.

“What do you think Lecter will do?” Mason asks, eyes wide with the gory possibilities.

“Kill them horribly, but with distinction.” Will says.

“Unfortunately, a rescue operation is out of the realm of possibility.” Jack says. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Verger. Signing off.”

Mason’s face vanishes and the split screen disappears leaving Jack in wide screen. Will thinks that a marginally better visual.

“There’s more than a little friction between you two. Still.”

“That’s not going to change, Jack.”

“You know…” Jack begins, and Will braces himself. “I have to wonder about this arrangement you have with Verger. What was all that about you going with them to Lithuania?”

“Mason doesn’t trust me. He expects his employees to keep an eye on me.”

“So, why would this Luciano and his sister leave you behind when they know what their boss wants?”

“Maybe they found me a bit of a drag, a tag along.” Will shrugs. “I’m not much fun.”

“Or maybe you put that idea in Luciano’s head. Why would you do that?”

“Because if Mason wants them to shadow me, then I don’t want them shadowing me.”

“Fair enough. Let’s talk about the laptop. Why aren’t you using it?”

“Because it is burned beyond recognition, like the rest of my apartment.”

“Say again? Where are you?”

“I’m still in Florence, Jack, just the address has changed. Don’t tell me you haven’t already identified this IP address. I have my reasons for not telling Mason. I was hoping you wouldn’t ask in front of him.”

“When did this happen? Your place burning down…”

“A couple weeks ago, while the twins were out of country. Mason doesn’t know and I would like to keep it that way.”

“Does that include me?”

“You have the IP address. We don’t exchange postcards…”

“Will, this is not the arrangement we agreed to. And with the disappearance of Mason’s people, this looks really bad. For you.”

“I know.”

“You know. What were you thinking?” Jack’s voice bellows through the speakers.

Will stares at him coldly, unaffected by the tactic. It’s just Jack blowing off steam. He will be blowing a gasket before too long.

“You send Mason’s people on a hunt to Lithuania, they move around Europe digging up dirt on Lecter, and end up in France. The last you hear from them is before they board their flight at De Gaulle. But you think they are in Florence?”

“Correct.”

“Lecter will kill them as you said. This is the best you could come up with? You handed those people to Lecter, Will.”

“Yes, I did. Want to know why?”

“I’m all ears, Will.”

“They work for Mason. Mason wants Hannibal at any cost. If I find Hannibal using his people, the FBI will never see Hannibal. You understand that, right?”

“Not exactly. *You* report to me, not Mason’s people. I think Mason would have no problem disposing of Hannibal on his own, but that’s not going to happen. That’s why you are there.”

“I copy Mason everything I send you.”

“As far as I know. So?”

“So that he knows that you know *what* he knows.”

I’m not following you, Will. This is a joint venture, why wouldn’t he be kept in the loop?”

Will shakes his head and laughs, bitterly, he doesn’t even recognize his own voice.

“Jack…who else knows you pulled me out of protective custody, besides Zee who has clearly been sworn to secrecy, and Mason and...well, Margot?”

“No one. As we agreed.”

“And what happens if something happens to me?”

Jack sits back in his chair, folds his hands together in a pyramid. The angry glint in his eyes melts away, his expression gentled by Will’s question, and he looks at Will in a way he has not in very long time. He purses his lips and lowers his eyes, an approximation of an apology. But not quite.

“What happened between you, Hannibal, and Verger?”

“You don’t really want me to tell you, Jack.”

“And why is that, Will?”

“Because then you’d be obligated to act and I don’t think you really want to do that. Not now.”

“Something happened.” Jack says softly. “Something to cause you to fear for your life.”

“Something sure did. Mason’s people are hired assassins. They would have killed me once I found Hannibal.”

Will watches Jack's eyebrows shoot up. "That's the truth, Jack. Mason wants us both dead. Mason is using you, so that he can use me to catch Hannibal. Then he'll thank me…"

"By killing you. For whatever however you helped…mutilate him."

Will does not nod; he does not acknowledge Jack's statement in any way. He can't. Jack knows he can't. Will thinks how adversarial their relationship has become. He can remember sitting on the bathtub with Jack as they had talked about the Ripper, the body of a freshly murdered victim of organ harvesting gone wrong sprawled in the tub between them. Jack had confided in Will back then.

You'll catch the Ripper eventually.

Yeah, well, I want to catch him now. And when I do, you're not gonna get a chance to shoot him, 'cause I'm gonna do that.

You can't just jack up the law and get underneath it.

Can't I?

Will had found Jack's dim view of the law rather startling for an FBI agent. He had come to respect Jack, had considered him close enough to be a friend, at least an ally. They had a shared desire for catching the Ripper. In the beginning, Jack had more reasons to catch him than had Will. By the time Will had found the Ripper, Jack had not believed him. Hannibal's design.

And yet, Jack had not abandoned him. Jack had not played the card Purnell had all but ordered him to play. Jack had put his career on the line to testify on Will's behalf. Later, he had covered Will's ass, or at least tried to, while they had laid their trap for Hannibal. Will had known all that and had still set Jack up, had sent him to dine with the Ripper. Alone.

Will thinks he might have shattered some tea cups himself. Jack is pretty shattered. He is at least chipped and perhaps as broken as Will. Will sighs and decides to give Jack the honesty he wants, as much as Will can afford to offer.

"Jack, there's something else about the twins you should know. They are part of a crime family here in Italy. Sardinia and Tuscany mostly. Hannibal killed two of their family who worked on the Verger estate for Mason, in the states. The Paolini family also wants Hannibal. And maybe…me. At any rate, Mason has hired them to kill us both, and not quickly."

"This is news. Why did Hannibal kill them?"

"They tried to kill him first."

Jack leans back in his swivel chair, fingers to lips, as he stares at Will's image on his computer. Will knows he won't ask how Will knows.

"Verger doesn't know you know. You've kept this to yourself. Knew Verger's intentions and agreed to his terms anyway."

"It's the only way to catch him, Jack. I was the lure before. I still am. Hannibal will make contact using the twins, I'm sure of it."

“So you hope to kill two birds with one stone. Lure him out and he kills the assassins. He’ll wring every bit of information he can from them before he kills them.”

“I know.”

“He’ll find you.”

“I know that, too.”

The back door flings open and the sound of the door slamming back against the jamb startles Will out of his seat. The dogs start to bark wildly, and Daniel drops his attaché case on the table with a loud thump.

“Hey girls.” Daniel is already on the floor, face in fur, as Cara and Bella fuss and lick at his clothes. “Did you miss me, huh? Did you miss me?”

Daniel perches on his knees, pushes himself off the floor and finally notices Will at his computer. He realizes Will is on camera with someone. He pats down his ruffled suit and walks over to the table and the laptop to peer over Will’s shoulder.

“Hey.” Will says, looking up.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

“Who the… Who is that?” Jack says, squinting into the camera.

“Jack, this is my psychiatrist, Doctor Clayton.” Will turns slightly toward Daniel, “This is Jack Crawford.”

Daniel’s face remains remarkably still although he blinks several times. Daniel can feel the tension in Will spread from his own jaw down his neck to settle in his shoulders. He has obviously interrupted a very heated discussion and he knows who they would be discussing.

“Hi.” Daniel says, “Good to finally put a face on the name.” He smiles at Crawford. He doesn’t really know what else to do.

“He’s…your psychiatrist. When did you start seeing another… Are you in his office right now?”

Jack sits gazing at both of them, eyes shifting from one to the other.

“I just left my office. This is my home. Will told you his place burned down? Well, I invited him to stay here.”

“And this is your laptop?”

“It is. Is there uh, anything you wanted to ask me before I take the dogs out?” Daniel offers, knowing Agent Crawford will have no questions for him until he talks to Will.

“No, not at the moment. But, if you won’t be too long, I might have some later.”

“Okay. Again, good to meet you.” Daniel looks down at Will. “I’ll get changed and take them out.”

Daniel walks around the other side of the table, out of Jack's line of sight, but clearly within Will's. Will sits so rigidly in his chair Daniel thinks he might split in two if he touched him. Crawford has him wound up tight. He wonders what prompted today's video conference.

You okay? He mouths silently. Will nods slightly and waves him off. He hears Daniel thump up the stairs, the dogs in tow, claws clicking against the hardwood trying to keep from slipping.

"Will, what the...What is going on with you?"

"Your concern is heartwarming."

"Why are you seeing a psychiatrist?"

"I'm alone, Jack. I needed some…objectivity."

"Living with him is hardly objective." When Will doesn't respond, Jack continues, "What…have you told him?"

"Everything."

"Will. You can't tell him classified information."

"Why not? Doctor patient confidentiality. I trust him, Jack."

"Well, that's saying something. You've done a one eighty on the psychiatric community. Why him?"

"He likes dogs."

"A singular endorsement for you. What else? What are his credentials?"

"Look him up. I'm sure you will."

"This is not a good time to fall apart Will, tell me that you are not falling apart."

"I'm not falling apart."

"Then why are you seeing him? I'm going to ask him when he gets back. Now, he'll claim doctor patient privilege; but I'm telling you that if I am not satisfied with the answers, I'm bringing you home. Is that what you want?"

"Bring me home for what? To finally stand trial for the charges hanging over my head? Because if I don't deliver on Lecter, you and I both know what will happen to me. You know what I want? I want a clear head. To get that, I need to hear how I sound to somebody…normal."

"These are not normal circumstances. I think you're right about Lecter taking the twins. I don't agree with your methods, but after four months of nothing, I'll take it without missing any sleep. But, I can't have you…losing yourself, or your mind over this."

"Conscience bothering you, Jack? I've already lost my mind. Doctor Clayton here is helping me adjust to what is left."

"What's left is you and I. We are the only ones to get close to him and live."

"There's Mason."

"Mason is a ruined hunk of flesh with a huge bank account. He was never *close* to Hannibal." Jack sighs and opens his mouth to speak, words still forming in his head. "I am alive only because Hannibal was interrupted. He would have eventually burst through that pantry door and finished the job. And he had called me friend."

"In Hannibal's mind, you were, Jack. Friendship is not something he would throw away easily. To his mind, you forced him to do something he regretted."

I forced you to do something I regret…

"Hmmm. Well, he would have killed me if Alana…and you had not arrived. He could have killed you, too, Will. But he didn't. There was no pantry door between you and him."

"No, just a blade."

"There was much more between you than that knife, Will."

"We've…been over this already. At the inquiry."

"This is just us talking. You and I. He loved you, Will. I don't know what else to call it. You let him…"

Jack stops, the words sit in his mind curdling like the expression on his face. Will waits, focuses on the sound of Daniel at the front door putting the leashes on the dogs. For the briefest of seconds, Will can imagine walking out the door with Daniel, running with the dogs around the park, this laptop and the image of Jack and all he represents gone, like none of it ever happened.

"Your DNA was all over his house, Will. In places it shouldn't have been. From the basement to the bathroom. You kept a toothbrush there for Christ's sake. And those drawings…pretty incriminating stuff.

"I know what you found, Jack. I already said…"

"I know what you said. You were baiting him. Is that what you told yourself? Your empathy, Will. You got too close. Too close to tell the difference between what you wanted and what he wanted. I need to know if you know what you want, now. In this moment."

"Jack…"

"I can't let you near him if I can't…"

"Can't trust me?"

"Can't be sure you won't become confused…again."

"You don't have anything Hannibal wants, except me. You can pull the plug if you want. There is nothing, absolutely nothing I can say that will convince you I am emotionally or mentally stable enough to handle it."

"There's your integrity. You still have that. Hearing from you that you at least you think you can handle it would go a long ways."

"Honestly, Jack? I don't know if I am up for it. But, I'm trying. He has to be stopped. We both want that.

"You remember the case with the dead woman in the horse?"

"How could I forget?"

"Well, there were indications of your state of mind when you were together even back then. I watched you and Hannibal exchanging looks while we took statements from each of you, while Ingram sat shaking in handcuffs. The man had pissed all over himself. Christ, Will, he had shit himself."

"I know. I was there."

"Do you know what he said once he was sitting on plastic in the back of the police car?"

"I guess you're gonna tell me."

"He said you held your gun to his head, tried to force him to pick up a hammer. He said you and the other guy with the accent had a strange conversation, but it was the other guy who stopped you from pulling the trigger. You, Will."

"It was…therapy."

"Goddamn it, Will. This is me you're talking to. Me!"

"And because it is you, I can't, Jack. Why didn't you act on it? Say something then?"

"Because Hannibal apparently opened the door on the other side, slipped inside for a few minutes for a conversation and slipped back out. Ingram never said another word about it. Like the entire episode had slipped his mind. Poof. Gone."

"Hannibal is quite the magician. He can make a lot of things disappear."

The front door opens and the noise of panting dogs fill the living room. Will turns his head to see Daniel hanging up the leashes. Daniel's walk was much shorter than usual. Will knows he wants to help and he didn't want to keep Jack waiting, or leave Will engaged in a conversation he clearly doesn't want any longer than necessary. Will can't help but feel relieved at the sight of Daniel massaging Cara's back as she stands stubbornly between his legs so Bella has to walk around him in circles for his attention.

"Well, let's just say I don't want him to make you disappear with him. If you don't think you can convince me you are stable enough, perhaps your psychiatrist can."

Jack's eyes move to the side of his screen and Will feels Daniel standing next to him.

"You should probably pull up a chair." Will says.

"Sure."

Daniel slides a straight back chair over, takes his seat. Will's emotional tide fairly wails beside him. Crawford has released a tumultuous storm pitching Will's emotions to and fro in its wake. Daniel shifts in his seat, settling in and opens his legs so his knee rests against Will's as he sits hunched over, tailbone on the edge of his chair. He watches Will's shoulders give a little and he feels Will nudge him beneath the table.

Daniel figures that's about as much support and affection he can offer with Crawford's face looming at him. He takes a moment to consider the head of Behavioral Sciences, the FBI agent who thinks of Will as his broken pony, his fragile tea cup, his only lead to Hannibal Lecter.

Agent Crawford is pining. He pines not for Lecter, although Daniel senses a similar determination to catch him, but for his wife. Daniel can sense the sadness in his movements, sees it in the hollow look in his eyes where there had once been tenderness. Daniel thinks finding Lecter is the only reason to live left to Jack. And that makes him dangerous. To Will.

"Will and I are just about finished." Crawford says, glancing at Will as if to concur, "I have a couple questions for you about his mental health. As his psychiatrist you are inclined to represent his best interests. I wouldn't expect anything less. I need to know if I can still put him out there."

"Is that one of the questions?" Daniel says.

Crawford smiles. "All right. I'll put things in context for you. Will says he has told you everything. I'm not sure what that means. Can you clarify what you know for me?"

"I think Will has explained all the events leading up to your last meeting with Lecter with clarity. Remembering those events is upsetting for him, but he has talked through them with me. He has likely discussed feelings with me he has not discussed with you, given the nature of our respective relationships."

"And from those discussions can you determine if he can emotionally handle confronting Lecter, again?"

"Agent Crawford, there is nothing in my experience that prepared me for what he told me. I think it a testament to your character, and his, that you continue to pursue Lecter. You have all been traumatized. Will's trauma is unique because of his gift. Does his gift enable him to still empathize with Lecter? Sure it does. I think what you really mean when you ask if he can handle confronting Lecter again is if Will is emotionally stable to know the difference between what he wants and what Lecter wants."

"Yes. That would be exactly what I need to know."

"Then my answer is yes."

"You are aware of the physical relationship between them?"

"Jack…" Will starts from his chair.

"Will, it's ok." Daniel says. "As aware as you, although my information was given to me freely, not culled from a forensic report. I suspect my understanding of the relationship is more…complex than yours."

"And knowing that, your answer would still be yes?"

"Yes, it would. Agent Crawford…"

"Jack…please." Crawford actually smiles, and the smile is warm. Tired, but genuinely warm.

“Jack. Will is hurting but functional. I can’t guarantee his good behavior. Neither can he. But I think his need for closure on this is as important to him, as it is for you. He needs a win here, Jack. Making him sit on the sidelines won’t do it.”

“And what did you think of his recent actions involving the twins?”

“I found his solution brutal, but brilliant. And evidence that he can still use Lecter’s thinking against him.”

“I think that you and I see Will the same way. Thank you for your insight, and…your honesty, Doctor Clayton.”

Daniel nods, “You’re welcome.”

Daniel squeezes Will’s shoulder and excuses himself from the conference by getting up and shoving his chair back under the table. Will watches him walk into the kitchen, open the fridge and take out a beer guzzling down nearly half the bottle before Will looks back at Jack.

“You two look a lot alike. You are aware of that, right?”

“Couldn’t miss it. He dresses better.”

“You need a haircut.” Jack says.

“That…is nothing new.” Will brushes curls out his eyes, almost smiles.

They are interrupted by banging on Jack’s door.

“Who is it? I’m in a conference here!” Jack’s voice booms through the speakers.

Will can’t make out the muffled words from behind the door, but it sounds like Zeller.

“Oh, all right. Come in, then.” Jack pauses as Zeller slips inside, closes the door behind him. “Just a second, Will.” Jack says.

“I was hoping you still had him online. Hey, Will.” Zeller sticks a flash drive into Jack’s computer. “You have got to check this out.”

“What are we looking at?”

“Footage from da Vinci airport, a week ago. Those are the twins, right there.”

“I see them. Can you hook it up for Will to see?”

“Yeah, give me a minute.”

“Looks like you were right. They made it back to Italy.”

Zeller has the video up and running in no time. Will watches the video queue up as Jack and Zeller once again are minimized into a smaller screen. The twins are walking, clearly drunk, across a parking lot carrying their baggage to their car. It’s a rental, the license plate clearly visible, but blurry. Zee can fix that later, probably already has and ran the plates, too.

Will watches the twins shift position in front of their rental. A stranger dressed all in black has accosted them, his back to the camera the entire time. Will's heart hammers almost skipping beats.

It's Hannibal.

Will knows it clear to his bones. The stranger never gives the camera a frontal or side view of his face. But the physique Will would recognize under any conditions. The composure, the self-aware mannerisms, the elegance of movement as the figure holds Lucia to his chest is all too familiar. Hannibal is practically posing for the camera. Or, for Will.

The video is brief. The altercation lasts only a minute at most before the twins and the stranger walk off camera.

"There's no more footage? From another lot, maybe?" Jack asks the back of Zeller's head.

"Nothing so far. This guy was aware of the cameras. He didn't park near any that's for sure." Zeller looks into the webcam. "It's him, isn't it? That's Lecter."

Jack is looking into the webcam, too. His face is pinched and gaunt as he looks into Will's eyes.

"Oh, that's him all right." Will says, feeling the smile spread over his lips and not caring. "Caught himself a double entrée."

Daniel walks over to the table and leans into the laptop. "You have Lecter on camera?"

"Yeah, but you can't see anything. You can't see his face."

"So how do you know?"

"I know." Will says looking up into Daniel's confused face.

Daniel swallows and nods. Of course, Will knows. The connection, the intimacy between them defies definition.

"Well, that cinches it." Jack says, "I'm coming out there. Should be there in a couple days."

"Jack, he hasn't done anything yet."

"And I want to be there before he does. Before the shit really hits the fan."

"It's going to get really, really messy. You'll be awash in it."

"Just like old times, then. I'll send you the details of my flight. You let me know if anything pops up on your end, and I'll do the same. Zee?"

"Yeah, Jack?"

"Send Will anything else you find on the airport footage or follow up. Make sure he has every scrap of information we have."

"You got it. This email address, Will?"

"Yeah, send it here."

Will looks at Daniel who nods, one hand on his hip the other holding a fresh bottle of beer.

“Jack?”

“What, Will.”

“Are you going to send this info to Mason?”

Jack taps his fingers on his desk, considering the question, and not favorably by the look on his face.

“Jack, I have appearances to maintain.”

“We don’t need him. Fuck him. Fuck, Mason.” Jack grins into the webcam.

Will feels himself grinning back. “Fuck Mason it is.”

“See you in a few days, Will.”

“Bye, Jack.”

Will turns to Daniel. “Got another one of those?”

Will nods at the bottle of beer Daniel holds in his hands. Daniel feels the tension from him still, Will’s back and shoulders must ache like hell because Daniel’s back feels stiff as a rod of rebar just standing next to him. Daniel also feels relief flowing from his limbs as well. It is the aching he feels along the invisible tear threading across his stomach that concerns him. The ache has intensified, the wound like a Geiger counter becoming more enflamed as Lecter draws closer.

“Plenty in the fridge. Ice cold.”

Will doesn’t hesitate. He cracks open a bottle and drinks deeply, enjoying the taste of malt and hops on his tongue, revels in the cool tingle as he swallows. In the space of time it took for the video conference with Jack, Will’s world has turned on its side once again. Jack is back.

“The silence before the storm, huh?” Daniel says filling the space beside Will on the counter.

“You uh, handled Jack pretty well. Gave him just what he wanted without lying.”

“I gave him an edited version of the truth.”

“A fine line.”

“Very. You do know the difference between what Lecter wants and what you want.”

“Uh huh. But Jack didn’t ask if there was difference.”

“And I’m not going to ask either.”

“Because you don’t want to know?”

“Because when you decide, I won’t have to ask.”

Daniel tips his bottle and taps it against Will's nearly empty bottle. Will lifts his head from the bottles to look into Daniel's face; pale blue eyes stare into deep green, each assessing the other. Daniel looks away first, brushes Will's hair out of his eyes, his fingers lingering in the soft curls.

"I'm in the mood for a little music. You up to practice?"

"Sing us a song you're the piano man…"

"Ugh. I *hate* Billy Joel." Daniel says as he walks over to the piano and picks up his violin case.

Hannibal sits at a corner table in a café situated in the back of a quaint market located the street below Via Fra Giovanni, the street bearing Fra Angelico's given name and the street along which Clayton lives. Hannibal can see the back of his rustic house from where he sits, sipping at ice water and waiting to order an iced cappuccino as the sun dips toward the horizon.

Hannibal notes the brick patio, the gas grill, and the vegetable garden. His fingers itch to prune the rose bushes that grow untended throughout the yard. The grass has grown too high, and the entire yard screams neglect to Hannibal. Will can have that effect on one. If one doesn't exert some control, one's passions will be one's undoing.

Hannibal knows this all too well.

The lovely little server has come around again, checking on her tables with a gracious smile. As she leans over Hannibal's table, he can see the drops of perspiration between her breasts, rolling like dew from freshly opened blush roses. He lets his gaze linger appreciatively on her slender form as she slides a menu in front of him.

"What do you recommend?" Hannibal asks her in Italian, laying out his wallet so that several Euros peek out from the black leather.

Her smile beams brighter still at the suave tourist speaking the language of commerce so perfectly. Hannibal has just ensured her unfailing attentions for as long he sits here.

"The coffee is our own blend, created especially for our store. For the meal…I would suggest the veal piccata."

"Then, the piccata it is. And an iced cappuccino."

"You are dining alone?"

"This evening, yes. So please come by as often you like."

"Okay. Are you in a hurry?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

"Well, you asked me what I recommended. If you like music, the classical kind, I recommend you stay a while. See that house up there, the one just above our terrace?"

"Yes, I do."

"The two guys who live there play all the time. It's like a concert."

"Really? A concert."

"Well, I think it's more a rehearsal, but they are pretty good. They'll open those big French doors so you can see the piano and they play duets. And it's free!"

"They play every night?"

"Almost. If they are home and they usually are. Everyone enjoys it. You'll see the neighbors come out and listen. We all clap so they come outside and take a bow."

"Well," says Hannibal, "I wouldn't miss it."

Hannibal senses movement in the house above, figures move by the French doors and the muffled sounds of the instruments tuning up filter through the open windows. Hannibal listens to a series of scales on piano and violin as the would be musicians warm up. Hannibal feels the anticipation rising, a luscious blooming from deep within. He is startled when he realizes he is feeling… happiness.

Clayton appears behind the frames of glass in the doors and he opens them onto the patio, his violin and bow tucked under one arm. Hannibal watches him disappear into the dark recesses of the house, the only light from the windows at the front of the house, casting everything in the room in stark silhouette.

The bass notes of Pachelbel's *Canon in D* register in Hannibal's ears and he sets down his fork.

Will...

Hannibal cannot believe that the fingers striking the keys are Will's. He stares unabashedly at the slender form at the piano. The wound erupts, a fissure in his chest and Hannibal bears it, though the moisture in the corners of his eyes causes him to blink. Once.

The French doors are flung wide open, Clayton's patio looms above like a stage and Hannibal can see Will's silhouette in profile hunched over the key board, mane of dark curls, distinctive nose, and the swell of lips slightly open in concentration as his hands move over the keys. Clayton stands beside him, violin poised upon his left shoulder, foot tapping in 4/4 time, as he waits for his measure to join Will.

Hannibal counts along silently in his mind and Clayton's bow slides across the strings perfectly in time. The notes soar, and the melody sinks into Hannibal's chest, bittersweet both blade and balm. Clayton wears a beatific smile as he plays, his eyes bright and alive as he watches Will play. Hannibal does not miss the unadulterated affection in those eyes. Clayton is not just playing with Will, he is playing to Will. Will sits upon the bench, eyes never wandering from the score, still lacking the confidence to look up from the keyboard.

Hannibal sits enrapt his meal forgotten as the sequential melodies wash over him, the notes resonate deep and rich, as the other people seated around him fade from his consciousness. Nothing else exists in this moment.

Will plays the ostinato, the ground bass and the first violin parts on the piano while Clayton plays third violin as it was intended. The arrangement they have chosen to play fuses the part of the second violin with the third. It is a simple arrangement, but they are playing it beautifully and Hannibal notes, they are playing it as one, each attuned to the other's presence. It is obvious they have played this piece many times.

Clayton is gifted and Hannibal thinks he might have missed his true calling. His fingers move along the frets with ease and precision, reason enough for the rough and calloused fingertips Hannibal had noticed. He stands close to Will, so his knees can prod him as he plays.

And Will needs the prodding. As they progress to last movement, Will's fingers falter. Hannibal watches Clayton lean into Will and speak into his ear. Will nods, apparently encouraged, but his fingers trail over the keys perhaps off by half a beat. Clayton covers for him a couple measures and Will manages to correct his timing.

Still having trouble with transitions Hannibal thinks as Will dutifully plays his part to the end, his bass notes synchronous with the closing strains from Clayton's violin. Hannibal is startled by the sudden bursts of applause that erupt from around him.

He had been so caught up in the performance that he had not noticed the neighbors scattered along the terraces, perched on walls or porches to listen.

"I told you." Hannibal's server says, appearing suddenly at his table. "Aren't they good?"

"Quite." Hannibal agrees. "Will they play something else?"

"Sometimes…oh, here he comes. The other one never comes outside."

Clayton has emerged from the house to stand on the patio, bow in right hand and violin held aloft in his left. He bows deeply amidst the ripples of applause from the appreciative neighbors and customers that are littered around his property.

"And, a little round for the piano player…"

Hannibal watches Will take one step outside the threshold of the French doors to wave and to glare at Clayton before ducking back inside. He is gone too soon. Hannibal had barely a glance at him. The server is waving wildly and Hannibal averts his head as Clayton notices her and waves back.

"Oh, they are going back inside. I guess that's all for this evening." She begins to gather up the plates from Hannibal's table. "Oh, you didn't finish. Was there something wrong?"

"Not at all. Just the heat."

"Would you like me to wrap it up? Put it in a doggie bag?"

Hannibal smiles at the ridiculous thought of having a dog. It occurs to him that such a thing is entirely possible…someday.

"No," Hannibal says, "But the veal was perfect. I'll be sure to come back. Just the check for now."

When Hannibal looks back up to the patio, Clayton has stepped back inside; drawing the doors behind him and the house is quiet once more. He takes the check from the dark haired young server and presses Euros into her hands. He glances up at Clayton’s house, his eyes recording every detail of the property, tucking it away for later.

He leaves the café knowing his generous tip will make the little server’s night. The walk back to his car will give him time to think in solitude. Seeing Will like this is tortuous. Leaving him here, in Fiesole while Hannibal drives back to Impruneta, even more so. Hannibal acknowledges that while the wait is tortuous, it is necessary.

He has preparations to make and invitations to send. The separating from Will tears at him, and Hannibal reminds himself it is temporary. He can allow Will to twist in his inferno a little longer. Hannibal will be delivering him from it soon enough. And Will can finally emerge from his dark pit tempered as the finest steel, a killer forged in the depths of his own hell. The question remains whether or not he is ready to join him at the table once again.

Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Hannibal prepares the Paolini twins for their date with Destiny. Daniel introduces Will to hallucinogens and hypnotherapy. Wolf Trap and The Inferno are among the stops Will makes on his trip...until Chapter 56. See Notes at the end.

“What is in the box that will uh…redeem us?”

“The box is for you, Luciano. Go ahead, open it.”

Luciano approaches the box with obvious trepidation mingled with curiosity and perhaps, his large brown eyes gleam with hope as he takes the scissors from Hannibal’s hands. There is no hesitation as he slices the tape that seals the cardboard. Luciano holds the scissors with a fondness of a hunter fondling his knife. Hannibal thinks that a good sign. Luciano will need his hunter’s instincts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Anton Pavlovich Losenko

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The Jaguar sits cold in the circular drive in front of Hannibal's villa. It is warm in Impruneta as the stars begin to come out in the Tuscan sky. It is warm but not sticky. A faint breeze from the over the hills bring relief. The windows are open in the kitchen so Hannibal can smell the fragrant aromas of his garden as much as to hear the sounds of life stirring in the dark outside.

Hannibal knows if he closes the windows all he will hear is the hum of the air conditioner. He could play some music, but he thinks he has listened to enough for the evening. He would prefer to listen to the gurgle of the fountain in the backyard, the chirping of insects, or the sound of bat wings beating as they search for their supper.

Hannibal is alone. And Will is not.

As his mind has done relentlessly upon learning Will's whereabouts, his thoughts rewind and replay events from the past, their past. His mind watches an endless movie that runs continuously through his memory palace. Tonight, as he reaches into the stainless steel fridge for the ingredients that will comprise a meal for the Paolini twins downstairs, he thinks on Will's intentions then and now.

How much of Will had been performance and much had been…Will? Hannibal does not retreat from fear. It is an emotion he has not felt since childhood and he might have trouble identifying it should he ever experience it. He thinks alarm would perhaps be more accurate. But fear is what he thinks he feels when doubts about Will enter his mind. Fear that he might be wrong, might have been wrong about Will all along.

To be wrong about Will would cause Hannibal to question his entire existence. Hannibal is never wrong. He miscalculates…from time to time.

We're just alike. This gives you the capacity to deceive me and be deceived by me…You're applying yourself to my perspective. As I've been applying myself to yours.

You're right. We are just alike. You're as alone as I am. And we're both alone without each other.

Will had leaned forward in his chair a little, his eyes intently focused upon Hannibal's as they often were when they sat facing each other in Hannibal's office, a room that, for them, had become an arena where the weapons had been words but each had drawn blood from the other nonetheless. Hannibal had looked into those pale blue eyes and that sincere face and had believed Will his.

Hannibal can remember every conversation they ever had and imagines so can Will. He thinks of the conversation they had standing over Clark Ingram while the police, the FBI, and Jack had arrived. Will had called in the apparent homicide while talking to Peter Bernardone and Hannibal had waited with the sheep. Poor Mister Ingram's life had gone from bad to worse in a matter of seconds. Bad enough Will had drawn his gun on him, but he had witnessed far too much for Hannibal to suffer his interference.

But all that had come after other revelations.

With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar, and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches, follows its own nature and is beyond me.

Will's hand had slowly let go of the Berretta Hannibal had just decocked, his sorrowful eyes looking squarely into Hannibal's, glistening with the questions and emotions surging through his mind. His fingers had trailed along Hannibal's fingers as he had allowed Hannibal to take the weapon from him.

Guns are efficient and are possessed of a certain utility certainly the military and law enforcement could not do without them, but Hannibal has never used one. He had been somewhat familiar with the pistols and shot guns favored by the FBI before becoming involved with Will and Jack, but it had not been until Will had attempted to kill him in Hobbs' kitchen that he had taken it upon himself to become more intimate with Will's weapons of choice. Of course, Will had not needed to know that.

Hannibal slices Roma tomatoes from his garden as he thinks of the encounter in the barn with Ingram. When Will had almost killed a man. Or had he?

Many troublesome behaviors strike when you are uncertain of yourself.

Peter Bernardone lies in the same darkness that holds you.

No, I'm alone in that darkness.

You're not alone, Will. I'm standing right beside you.

"Is that supposed to be comforting?"

Will had continued to gaze out the windshield his hand slipping inside his coat where Hannibal knew his side arm was strapped to his body like a snug safety blanket.

“More comforting than the gun you cradle to your chest. Which weapon of choice do we have this evening?”

“And why would you need to know that?” Will had almost laughed and glanced out the dark side window, his reflection causing him to turn right back around.

“I’ve taken an interest in the guns you use.”

“The FBI issues all kind of weapons. It’s a long list.”

“I mean *your* weapons.”

Will had at last turned away from the windshield to look at Hannibal, eyes glittering with an almost cruel amusement.

“That’s a very specific interest, doctor. And when exactly did my weapon become worthy of your interest?”

“I would think that obvious. You are very fond of your…weapons. I have been curious since you aimed one at my face in Hobbs’ kitchen. And you aimed another one at me, in my own kitchen. I think you can appreciate my curiosity.”

Hannibal had given Will a sidelong glance. Will had simply stared back at him until Hannibal had been forced to return his attention back to the road. They had ridden in silence for a minute or so, until Will had cleared his throat, more a grunt than anything else.

“You really don’t know much about guns, do you?”

“I avoid them…or try to.”

Will had actually chuckled softly, and Hannibal had enjoyed the rich throaty sound like a stolen gift. He had presented Hannibal with another unwitting gift with the trail of his tongue over moistened lips as he had continued to reflect on Hannibal’s comment.

“I must be crazy…talk about inviting troublesome behaviors…” he had muttered under his breath but he had reached inside his coat and had unsnapped the holster. The Berretta had gleamed shiny and black as Will had held it up to the dashboard within Hannibal’s line of sight.

“It’s a Berretta 84FS. Sometimes called a Cheetah, I don’t know why. You unlock it like this…” Will had given him a demonstration, holding the gun close to the steering wheel. “And you unlock it…there…like that. The magazine comes out like this…and you put it back in like that.”

“And the rest is just aim and shoot?’

“Pull the trigger and the bullets come out.”

“How sensitive is the trigger?”

“Very.”

"How sensitive is your trigger?"

A pause and then, "Equally very."

Will had holstered his sensitive weapon as they had pulled up to drive leading to the barn. As they had rolled up closer to the entrance it was evident that Peter Bernardone had had company. A sleek cherry red Mustang had sat parked next to Peter's hay filled truck. Will had unsnapped his holster, again.

Even Hannibal had been unprepared for the sight they had found upon walking inside and finding Peter Bernardone kneeling before his very bloated and very dead horse. Will had quickly surmised what had happened and had approached cautiously with gun drawn. Will's gift for the macabre was unsurpassed.

Peter, is your social worker in that horse?

Yes

Peter's voice had broken like the abused child he was. Hannibal had been all too aware of the parallels Will had drawn between the social worker and Peter and Hannibal and himself. It had been apparent to Hannibal on the drive over that Will was still grieving over what had been lost and what had changed.

You look like a man who has suffered an irrevocable loss.

I'm trying to prevent one.

Will had lost his innocence and had desperately desired for the damaged Peter to retain his. Will's pain upon hearing Peter's reply had radiated from every part of him. He had walked past Hannibal to kneel down alongside Peter. He had guided Peter away from his dead and desecrated horse and Hannibal had watched the two of them disappear around the corner, his presence reduced to an afterthought in Will's mind.

Hannibal's surprise had barely time to register as he had stared unbelieving at the sudden eruption of fingers poking out from slimy sutures, followed by the tide of equine fluids and entrails as the ignominious Ingram had climbed out of the carcass and stumbled across the floorboards toward Hannibal to fall on his knees gasping for air. Hannibal's first thought had been of Will around the corner even as he had cautioned the bewildered social worker.

Mr.Ingram. Might want to crawl back in there if you know what's good for you.

Is if on cue, Hannibal had heard Will's footsteps and had moved aside. Whatever misplaced relief Ingram had felt upon seeing Hannibal had vanished at the sight of Will coming around the corner with arm raised and finger already cocking the pistol in his hand. Ingram had quickly abandoned his victim act when Will informed him he wasn't a police officer but a friend of Peter's.

Hannibal had watched the exchange between Will and the social worker with elation and a growing apprehension. To see the killer in Will had been exhilarating. To know he had been entertaining the idea of shooting Ingram in cold blood with the presence of mind to tell him to pick up the hammer had pleased Hannibal to no end. But he could not allow Will to go through with it. That Will had thought about it had been enough. The willingness to bestow judgment upon a lesser being had been a necessary step in his becoming.

Hannibal wonders now if Will would have actually pulled that trigger. Their conversation at the time had been convincing enough. Will's tightly coiled fingers depressing the trigger had certainly been convincing. Their conversation the following evening during Will's session had been convincing.

I regret what I did in the stable.

Then, you were lucky I was there.

Oh, no, no, no. Being lucky isn't the same as making a mistake. The mistake was allowing you to stop me.

So, it's not pulling the trigger that you regret, it's not pulling it effectively.

That would be more accurate.

You must adapt your behavior to avoid feeling the same way again, Will.

Will had been referring to his regret about being too conflicted, too aware of how the regret that taking another life would fill him afterward, to pull the trigger effectively. Anticipating regret impairs decision making. Will had correctly identified a limitation.

Hannibal had recognized that Will would require a situation in which regret would not play a part in his decision making. He had to learn to accept the regret and set it aside. He had needed a situation where he would complete his kill and experience the purity of that kill without hiding behind a weapon. That would come with Randall Tier.

Ingram would not have provided the requisite learning environment for Will's particular sensitivity. Hannibal had known that regret would always be present in Will. It is one of the ingredients that defines him. Will can kill with precision and detachment and yet feel regret afterward and this is what Hannibal finds so beautiful in Will. To expunge that particular quality completely would be undesirable if not impossible.

Everything about the encounter and the subsequent session had seemed genuine. Will's responses had felt genuine from the barely contained contempt for Hannibal to the transparent curiosity about himself. And yet, if Hannibal had not stopped him, Will could have just as easily have sighed and dropped his arm claiming regret; or better yet flung his Berretta across the barn in a fit of tears, also claiming regret and that would have been equally convincing.

So infuriating, his Will.

At the time, however, Hannibal had been pleased at the transformation. Once Will had come back to himself, had broken the eye contact and their near embrace, he had stood gazing at the speechless Ingram with the familiar frown. He had lifted his eyes to meet Hannibal's and had held out his right hand for his gun.

"Jack shouldn't see you with that." Will had said, palm up.

Hannibal had placed the heavy weapon and all its responsibility back into Will's waiting hand. Will had checked it once before slipping it back inside his coat.

Hannibal had glanced at Ingram, who had begun to emanate an unmistakable fecal aroma in addition to the pungent fragrance of horse entrails and viscera. The man had been swaying from side to side, his complexion taking on a greenish tint. Perhaps it had been the light.

"Do you think it wise to put away your gun so soon?"

"Oh, he's not going anywhere. Are you, Mr. Ingram?"

Ingram had not been unable to utter a single word as he had stared at Will from the floor. He had been shaking, his arms wrapped uselessly around his soaking wet shirt. He had been shivering from the cold, from the fear, but mostly from shock. Hannibal had glanced at the horse blanket hanging on the far wall but had thought draping it over Ingram too disrespectful…to the horse. He had looked back to Will who had been eyeing Ingram with cold curiosity, and the ever present disdainful frown.

"How long before the FBI…" Hannibal had started to say.

"Anytime now."

The sound of shuffling feet across boards had registered in Hannibal's consciousness. Both he and Will had turned to see Peter slink around the corner, eyes fixed on Ingram. His mouth had opened in anguish and his sobs had wracked his entire body.

"Go." Hannibal had said, "I'll stand with Mister Ingram…and the sheep."

Will had thrown an arm over Peter's shoulder and had guided the emaciated and forlorn figure back around the corner while Hannibal had waited with Ingram. Hannibal had watched him stare into space his lips moving as he had uttered what Hannibal thinks were empty prayers.

The sounds of police sirens had sounded in the distance and before long the barn and its environs had been swarming with law enforcement. Hannibal marvels still at the speed with which the police can arrive at a crime scene but cannot be found when one's car has broken down. Hannibal had stood next to Will as Jack had pulled up in his usual FBI issue black SUV.

Jack had stepped out of the car, slammed the door with flourish, and had sauntered up to the barn, hands in pockets and dragging along with him an air of irritation to rival the stench inside.

"Doctor Lecter…Will. So, you want to fill me in? Let's start with why you are even here in the first place."

Jack had taken statements from each of them, Will first. Jack had separated them physically, about twelve feet apart, but they had been able to communicate well enough even under Uncle Jack's watchful eyes. From what Hannibal had been able to discern from where he stood, Will had stammered out an abbreviated version of what had actually happened interspersed with frequent appeals to accompany Peter to the mental ward awaiting his arrival.

While waiting his turn to be interrogated by Jack, Hannibal had had the opportunity to observe Ingram. As soon as Ingram had seen the actual police approach him, his shaking and silent praying had ceased. He had then become a veritable font of verbosity; his words had spilled so quickly he had to be reminded to breathe. Hannibal had watched Ingram stumble alongside the officers to the police car. How miraculous that he had managed to pull himself out of his daze to relate what had occurred in the barn. Hannibal had known what had to done about that.

He had glanced at Will who had also noticed that a lack of loquaciousness was no longer a problem for Ingram. Hannibal had nodded at the police car. Will had caught the gesture and had lowered his eyes and inclined his head. Hannibal had walked swiftly to the car and the chagrined Ingram, who had frantically tried to reach across the length of the back seat to lock the other door with his nose Hannibal supposed. The officer guarding the vehicle had turned to the sound of Hannibal opening the door.

“Hey, you can’t be talking to him.”

“I’m his psychiatrist. May I? I won’t be long. Is he handcuffed?” Hannibal had asked with mock trepidation.

After a second of consideration, the young officer had nodded. “He’s cuffed, but be careful And just a minute…that’s all. I shouldn’t be letting you do this.”

Hannibal had nodded in gratitude. Law enforcement was always letting people like him do things they shouldn’t. Being a doctor has its advantages.

“You’re rather ripe.” Hannibal had said slipping into the back seat, barely touching the seat and holding his coat close. He had left the car door open for both safety and fresh air.

“Get out! I don’t have to talk to you.”

“No, you don’t. Listen then. We spoke before about what was good for you.”

Ingram had stared dully at Hannibal, full of smug condescension.

“Your brand of brutality has struck an ugly chord in Mister Graham. He would be the one with the gun. I think we can agree you have found yourself in a very undesirable situation.”

Hannibal had paused but Ingram remained sullen and silent.

“Before it becomes more undesirable, I think it prudent you recall the conversation you witnessed and think carefully about what kind of men would engage in such a conversation. You should then think carefully about what those kind of men might do in the event they find themselves in an undesirable situation such as yours.”

Ingram’s eyes had flickered and Hannibal had continued, “I think I might forget about what happened in the barn since it had nothing at all to do with me, nothing at all. In fact, I would think my own situation demanded all of my attention and energy.”

Ingram had sat quietly in his handcuffs and his fetid fluid soaked clothes and had nodded slowly.

“Good evening then, Mister Ingram. I doubt we shall see each other again.”

Hannibal had climbed out of the car to find the police officer standing by the door.

“I thought you said you were his psychiatrist.”

“I was. He just fired me.”

Hannibal had walked back to Jack and Will. Jack had still been talking and Will had still been half listening, his attentions divided between Hannibal and Peter. Peter had been taken to an ambulance, not twenty feet away, and was being treated for trauma. Had Mister Ingram kept his mouth shut, he would have been sitting in an ambulance and not a police car.

Hannibal had nodded once at Will who had lifted his head and Hannibal had heard the audible sigh from his lips where he had stood. Hannibal's conversation with Jack had been much shorter, especially since Hannibal's responses had been presumably nearly identical to Will's. Jack had stood with feet apart rubbing his hands together as he had faced the two of them.

"I'm going to wrap this up. You can go home. I take it you rode together?"

"My car is over there." Hannibal had gestured toward his Bentley.

"I'd like to ride with Peter." Will had said, "I'll catch a cab from there."

Will had not even looked at Hannibal, his attention focused solely on Jack's face. Hannibal had expected Will to indulge his emotional attachments. Jack had sighed and waved toward the ambulance and Will had abruptly turned and walked off without so much as a thank you. Jack had stood beside Hannibal and together they had watched him approach the back of the ambulance only to be stopped by the armed officers on either side of the vehicle.

"Let him through." Jack had waved and nodded to the officers.

After Will had climbed inside the back and had disappeared from view, Jack had turned to Hannibal.

"Still reflecting and absorbing, isn't he?"

"He can't help it, Jack."

"He can't help picking up strays, either. Goodnight, Doctor Lecter."

Jack had stalked off to mind the store as he referred to his duties; and Hannibal had had nothing left to do but drive home. The car with Ingram sloshing around the back seat had already departed and the ambulance doors had been closed, its engine running and lights on. Hannibal had been very pleased with how the evening had turned out. Hannibal wonders now if Will had been pleased; for the same reasons or his own.

Hannibal allows the memory to retreat, his attentions focused on the task of arranging the food on the plates for the twins. In every great lie there is a kernel of truth. Will had learned his lessons well. Lies and deception had been delivered in equal measure and truth had been as fine between them as the smudges of olive oil Hannibal spreads across the toasted pane for Lucia.

If Will had been lying, Hannibal has to conclude that Will is an exceptional liar. He has not yet heard from his cousin and Hannibal hopes that when he does, he will find the news illuminating.

Hannibal unlocks the door to the guest room where the twins wait for their evening meal. They do not know it is evening, but they require nourishment regardless. Lucia is recovering splendidly from her surgery, the sutures are sealing without any trace of necrotic encroachment. Emotionally, she could be faring better. Hannibal could tell her that her missing arm will barely impact on the quality of life left to her though he doubts she would draw comfort from his words.

Comfort is of paramount importance at this juncture in their captivity. Comfort encourages cooperation. Hannibal requires cooperation. Cooperation requires hope. Hope for the Paolini requires deception of the highest magnitude. Hannibal must therefore imply and insinuate and leave them to choose hope instead of despair.

Hannibal does not like to lie. One should avoid the deliberate misappropriation of the truth whenever possible. Unfortunately, society as a whole does not appreciate truth, especially when served unadulterated, no sugar, no cream…just black.

The door opens slowly its weight requiring more than a gentle shove from Hannibal's shoulders to swing upon its sturdy hinges. He sets the tray containing the meal for the twins down at the folding table he has supplied for them. They no longer sleep upon mattresses on the floor but proper beds and they believe their obsequious behavior has been rewarded by the removal of their restraints.

Luciano looks up from the music magazine he rifles through and Lucia rises up from her pillow, the sleeves of the pale pink nightgown sliding off her shoulder as she shifts cautiously twisting her body to better see Hannibal. She starts to pull the flannel back up, but realizing it will slip off the stump of flesh regardless, merely groans and looks to the ceiling instead.

Hannibal sets the tray on the table and watches Luciano devour the sumptuous spread with his large brown eyes. He licks his lips and looks up at Hannibal waiting for permission to eat like a well-trained dog, or mutt as the case may be. Hannibal points to the place settings.

"Napkin, Luciano."

"Right…right." Luciano waves his hands over the table until his fingers alight on the fresh linen and he tucks the napkin under the table, spreads it over his freshly laundered sweat pants. He looks back up at Hannibal. "Better?"

"That…will do. Please, enjoy."

Hannibal turns to Lucia, "Would you like to try and eat at the table with your brother?"

"I don't know. I don't feel so good, still." Comes the stifled reply.

"Well, you've lost an arm, not a leg. You should be up and about. It's not good to lie in bed for so long. Here, I'll help you to the table."

He walks over to stand beside the bed, Lucia's eyes growing wider as Hannibal approaches her. Hannibal gazes down at the unfortunate young woman. Unfortunate, because she represents such a waste of life not because what remains of her life can be counted in hours. Hannibal flicks stray blonde hairs from her face and pauses as she flinches, recoiling from the hands that have mutilated her.

"Come now, Lucia. Why the sad face? You need your nourishment. Up, up."

"You took my arm!" Lucia whines at him from her pillow.

"Yes, but you didn't feel it, did you? You have felt no pain at all, nor will you so long as you behave."

Hannibal takes a step back from the bed and waits for the neurons to fire from the depths of her limbic cortex. He watches Luciano pluck sections of freshly peeled oranges from the tray while stealing glances at his sister. She turns her head from Hannibal to look at her brother.

“*Luciano, è buono*?

“*Sì, molto buono , si dovrebbe avere un po* '”

“See? Even your brother thinks you should have some. Give me your arm, ah…this one of course, and I’ll help you out of bed. *Buona*?”

Hannibal offers an easy smile and his hand which Lucia takes and allows Hannibal to help her slide out of the bed that rests so high off the floor that her piggish little toes have to stretch to find the cool cement. By the time she has reached the table, her grip on Hannibal’s hand is no longer tentative, but quite vigorous. Her hand slips from his grasp as Hannibal pushes in her chair so she sits facing her brother.

Hannibal feels vindicated as her eyes alight on the food. Lucia observes her brother has already started and picks up her fork as she scans the selections before her. Luciano ‘s eyes move over his sister, and his eyes twitch in sympathy but rather than direct the anger that soon follows at Hannibal, he turns his head to stare at the wall instead.

“Ah, ah, ah. Lucia. Your napkin?”

Lucia quickly stuffs the napkin under the table and across her knees like her brother, an indication that at some point, someone had exposed them to some form of table etiquette. She looks up at Hannibal, the nostrils of her turned up nose quivering with the aromas beneath it.

“What is all this?” She asks, eyes as wide and brown as her brother’s, though her pupils are dilated with pain killers.

“We have grilled pane Siliciano topped with mozzarella and plum tomatoes from my garden, some fresh fruit, mostly oranges, and caffee latte with plenty of sugar and a sprinkle of cinnamon. For Luciano who needs his protein a stuffed pork chop with dressing and gravy like mama would make.”

“You mean a…real pork chop?” Luciano says ever so quietly.

“I did say like mama would make. Your mama, Luciano.”

Hannibal stands over the table and waits. The aroma of garlic and other seasonings on the pork quickly convince Luciano to give the chop a try. He slices off a chunk and closes his eyes as the tender meat touches his tongue.

“Mama never made pork chops like this.” Luciano says, stabbing at another morsel to fill his greedy mouth.

Hannibal supposes that is as much a compliment as Luciano is prepared to offer him. Of course, when one’s meals are spaced nearly eight hours apart, one’s palate is hardly discerning. Hannibal watches Luciano carefully. His meals have been free of sedatives and Hannibal has relied upon behaviorism and intimidation to ensure Luciano’s good behavior.

Hannibal’s positive reinforcement has been supported by the implied threat of further dismemberment of his sister. Hannibal’s surgical instruments can rest in plain view beneath the plastic cover because Luciano dares not attempt anything that would endanger his sister. She is in no condition to leave and Luciano would never go without her. Hope of a rescue still blooms for the Paolini.

Luciano is no longer drugged because Hannibal’s invitation to Will and - Hannibal quickly amends his thought - and guest requires Luciano’s mind and body are fully functioning; otherwise, Luciano will not find Hannibal’s proposition credible. Hannibal must allow him a fighting chance or he will believe his situation hopeless. And that simply will not do.

Hannibal watches them eat. They exchange looks with one another as they do, communicating in a private language. What they have is a wordless exclusive bond that, for them, had originated in utero. Hannibal thinks it likely they almost read each the other’s thoughts. He imagines them growing up together and finding each other so much alike, that despite sharing a womb, rather because of it; they could not resist physical intimacy. Intimacy with anyone else does not approach the oneness they share.

Neither can one of them can imagine life without the other, to wound one is to wound the other.

The beauty of their symbiosis resonates, striking at the chords of loneliness and discharging an eviscerating echo within the cavernous hole Will left in his chest. The longing Hannibal had felt at the sight of him had been enough to evoke the singular strains that for Hannibal have not stilled for a single second since their separation.

Hannibal has believed that he shares something similar with Will, an exclusive bond. But after seeing him with Clayton, Hannibal wonders if Will’s empathy has allowed him to sublimate his feelings for Hannibal and redirect them onto Clayton. The mirrors in Will’s mind compulsively do that. He absorbs. He cannot help but absorb Clayton, who looks so much like Will, who is possessed of so many qualities Will once attributed to himself, that Will must feel like he stares into his own past every time he looks at him. Absorbing Clayton into his consciousness would seem to Will like finding a forgotten old coat and slipping it on to find it still fit.

There is an alternate possibility that causes Hannibal’s hands to flex with impatience. The alternative, already introduced by Du Maurier, would be unthinkable and yet Hannibal must consider it.

I miss him.

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

I'm intrigued.

Obsessively. And he will take advantage of that.

Will is my friend.

Why? Why is he your friend?... What can't you repress, Hannibal?

What, indeed.

Knowing first-hand the extent of Hannibal's determination and the tenacity he displayed while following his urges, she had feared her patient would cultivate his newfound inspiration to her detriment. She had believed Hannibal's pursuit of friendship with his own patient misguided and perhaps to her thinking, infatuation at best. She believed him pursing fantasy.

I'm trying to help him understand.

You may not be able to…Even the very best psychiatrists have an inherent limitation to their professional abilities. You may find that difficult to accept.

You're right. It is.

You have to maintain boundaries, Hannibal.

Du Maurier had been referring to the boundaries between reality and fantasy as well as the physical and emotional boundaries between doctor and patient, even within the narrowly defined parameters Du Maurier and Hannibal assumed as therapists. Hannibal had had fantasies about Will. And Will had made those fantasies flesh and blood for Hannibal. He had left Hannibal dizzy and craving more. He had left Hannibal vulnerable to the flaw in his own design.

Hannibal sits in the basement of an Italian villa far from Baltimore watching two Sardinian assassins gulp down sustenance because of Will. Will twists in his inferno because his own design had backfired on him, spectacularly. They have wounded each other rather spectacularly. Truth had indeed imparted consequences.

Hannibal watches Lucia lift her cup of latte from its saucer and imagines a sun soaked breakfast nook where Abigail still languid with sleep sips daintily from the porcelain as she smiles at Will, who sits across from her squinting through the morning light in wrinkled pajamas, chiding her about picking the tomatoes off the pane as he slips a morsel of meat into his mouth. Hannibal watches the cup crumble in Abigail's hands and Lucia and Luciano sit before him once again. This was not the life he had wanted.

Hannibal must learn if Will's innate nature still dominates; or if Clayton's influence has soothed the savageness and tamed the urges. Hannibal must know if Will still craves that awesome sense of power that had caused his eyes to shine with wonder and his body shudder with pleasure.

I forgive you, Will. Will you forgive me?

Don't…don't…no…

With one glaring exception, Will has never disappointed Hannibal. That glaring exception had been miscalculation, on Will's part and Hannibal's. Hannibal has forgiven Will but he has not forgiven himself for his own blind rage. The rage had been commensurate with the passion that had preceded, precipitated it. The magnitude of miscalculation is always proportional to the stakes. The punishment equal to the offense. Hannibal thinks now his punishment too severe and the offense understandable, even pardonable.

Forgiveness is such a profound, conscious and unconscious state of affairs. You can't actually choose to do it. It simply happens to you.

Has Will forgiven him? Or has Hannibal wounded him too deeply for forgiveness to happen?

As Hannibal watches Luciano eat his chop through eyes that insist on seeing Will instead, the ache in his chest gives him pause. At the time, Hannibal's entreaty had been spoken in anger, in anticipation of delivering the cruel and final blow he knew would tear Will apart. A taunt lacking the gentleness with which he would speak it now.

Hannibal had not expected forgiveness from Will at the time. His own declaration had lacked the requisite sincerity given the act that had followed. But he has forgiven Will. He wants forgiveness from Will. He wants to hear the words from his lips as much as he wants to breathe.

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

Will had needed more time.

Always aware of his vulnerability to the emotions of others, Will had isolated himself in the course of his daily life cloaked in a persona designed to keep others away. As Hannibal had pointed out, Will had stigmatized himself. Working for Jack had forced him to socialize, throwing him into constant contact with an array of personalities whose emotions had washed over him like rain leaving him soaked in sensations clinging to him like a drenched jacket. The jacket of residue clings to him still. A residue Clayton believes he can rinse from Will as though Hannibal had been a mere stain. Hannibal's immeasurable influence is not the only raiment with which Will cloaks himself. Surely Clayton must realize by now that the taint of Will's darkness bleeds into every fiber of his being.

What a trying and novel experience for Will to try and separate his emotions from everyone else's in order to adopt only Hannibal's under the intense pressure that laying his trap with Jack had brought down upon him. He had been unable to do it.

He had been drowning. Jack had seen it, and had cut Will loose deciding to take on Hannibal by himself with disastrous consequences.

Will is an innocent.

Yes. He is.

I mean, Will is genuine. He'll survive anything I could put him through. He will always fight his way back to himself.

Not always. So far.

Uncle Jack's belief in Will had been sorely tested after uttering those words. Jack had had plenty of time to observe and reevaluate his prized profiler, since that conversation. Jack had stood by and watched Will succumb first to his nature, and then to Hannibal. Jack had not required GPS tracking to know where Will was spending his time. Jack had known, but he hadn't wanted to see it. The seeds of doubt Hannibal had sewn had stubbornly cropped up despite Jack's efforts to stomp them back into the distressed soil of his mind where he was also stomping on the insidious vines of his wife's cancer. By the time Jack had received Hannibal's invitation to dinner, he no longer cared whether Will had absorbed Hannibal or not, no longer cared with whom Will had been empathizing. Jack had come calling to collect payment. And collect he had. The beautiful Bella lies in the ground and Uncle Jack runs after Hannibal because the running is all he has left.

As his reunion with Will draws ever closer, Hannibal thinks of Will running circles in his inferno. Hannibal's invitation will send him running straight to Hannibal. And when they collide, as they are destined to do, Will will discover he has not run into Hannibal, but himself. Hannibal is not sure what Will will do when he stops running. Clayton is the unknown variable in Hannibal's equation.

As the twins finish off their breakfast and Hannibal contemplates the tray of nearly empty bowls, cups, and dishes he thinks of the encounter between Du Maurier and Clayton at the guest house. Clayton's behavior intrigues Hannibal.

Clayton's reactions to Du Maurier suggest it is possible that Clayton possesses some form of evolved empathy. Nothing like Will's gift certainly, but the sex with Du Maurier had suggested something of the kind of empathic transfer Will had demonstrated on many occasions. Had Hannibal not experienced something similar with Will, Clayton's behavior might be written off as drug induced.

Watching Clayton slam Du Maurier against the wall had been a vicarious thrill. Hannibal thinks he exercised considerable restraint. Hannibal would have liked to have seen him scrape her skin against the wall until she had wailed, blood streaming from abrasions along her bare back like cracks in marble. Hannibal thinks Clayton too much a gentleman to actually hurt her. He had been exercising restraint, but not out of courtesy. He had been prepared to indulge himself, at least before succumbing to Du Maurier's unnecessary pharmaceutical cocktail, robbing him of whatever control he had thought he had over her.

Hannibal thinks he might have actually been feeling Du Maurier's sexual responses, and unable to control his own responses, had collapsed in what Hannibal can only describe as sensory overload. A man can hold his release, especially in the absence of any direct tactile stimulation as had been the case with Clayton that evening. It had seemed to Hannibal that on some level, Clayton had experienced what Du Maurier was experiencing and he had been experiencing it involuntarily. Clayton had clearly wanted Du Maurier beneath his hips, not his mouth.

The only instances Hannibal had ever witnessed of one's oral fixation culminating in untouched orgasm had been with Will. And Will's empathy had figured prominently in those encounters.

Clayton's fingers find his lips in conversation constantly, and Hannibal had watched him eat his breakfast with undeniable relish, practically sucking fruit juice from his fingers in almost infantile pleasure. Clayton is similarly as fixated as Will. And yet, the stimulation of one's erogenous zones alone could not have precipitated the simultaneous release Hannibal had seen. Clayton had lost his emotional control and he had not wanted to.

Hannibal is sure Clayton does not even like Du Maurier. His intentions that evening had been to dominate pure and simple. Du Maurier's focused attentions had aroused irritation; he had found her transparent objectification of him intolerable and had been prepared to engage in a little objectifying of his own. Du Maurier had anticipated his reaction and had drugged him to retain control. A creature addicted to dominance herself, she could not have behaved otherwise.

She had no doubt hoped to elicit information about Will that evening. Hannibal thinks reconnaissance the primary reason for serving him the cocktail. With Clayton's inhibitions departed, his body putty in her hands, she could have asked him anything and he would have answered, remembering nothing. Du Maurier would know that extracting information from a patient under those conditions is not reliable. The same drugs that lower one's inhibitions also cloud the mind, and while the responses are genuine, the actual facts are jumbled up with the emotions elicited by the drugs. Du Maurier chose to ignore the detractors. She wanted as much information as Clayton was able to provide before the transfer of assets.

But Clayton’s near death experience had precluded that. She had spent the remainder of her evening cleaning up vomit and playing nurse. So much for short cuts sniffs Hannibal. Hannibal had learned much more in the half hour left in his session with Clayton than he supposes Du Maurier had learned. And Clayton had been completely sober. Desperate circumstances require desperate measures, and Du Maurier reeks of desperation.

The display of desperation is uncharacteristic of Du Maurier and the reason for it rattles like chains in the back of Hannibal’s mind. Chains he has no intentions of wearing. She is showing her hand deliberately to misdirect, or she is genuinely desperate which suggests complications of the most serious kind. Du Maurier as always, keeps Hannibal sharp. He has not heard from her since he sent the roses. She will likely call today to thank him.

Hannibal is not seeing something. Hannibal is confident that Du Maurier will reveal herself in time. The light of Apollo shines upon Achilles not his enemies. Du Maurier will be revealed in the light.

Hannibal returns his thoughts to Clayton and Will.

If Clayton could empathize with Du Maurier, even under duress, Hannibal can imagine how much more enjoyable he finds empathizing with Will. Du Maurier had not required emotional attachment from Clayton to pursue intimacy. Will would require an entire battery of emotions to be present to even consider intimacy of that sort. Clayton’s bruises attest to the fact that Will has done much more than consider the possibilities.

Will’s memories must assail his mind constantly, the scar stretching along his stomach an inescapable souvenir with scintillating and sensual associations. Will would be aware of the associations, and as his therapist, so would Clayton.

Hannibal thinks on how they might reconcile that. He can only conclude that Clayton would be attempting to overwrite those associations. Clayton must understand that he cannot put the genie back in the bottle, but he can present the genie with his wishes and hope the genie will see the wisdom in granting them. And the rewards.

When you take him to a crime scene, Jack, the very air has screams smeared on it. In those places, he doesn't just reflect; He absorbs.

Will would reflect the best of Clayton, the evidence before Hannibal’s eyes and ears just hours ago. That had not been Will playing piano on the patio. He had not been accompanying Clayton; he had *been* Clayton, at least a version of Clayton, for Clayton. Will had been moved to bestow a token of his affection by becoming, for a little while, what Clayton had desired.

Will is not an empty vessel awaiting the emotions of others to fill him up. Will knows who he is despite Hannibal’s best efforts to convince him otherwise. But, he learns by the compulsive absorbing. He learned to adapt. He observes, silently, unobtrusively, associations winding around his mind like tentacles, like branches, the process of assimilation natural and beautiful. Organic and divine.

Will would have invariably absorbed everything about Clayton, too. He has found in Clayton an ally, a balm for the loneliness. And Will finds him every bit as appetizing as Hannibal had found him. As Du Maurier had known Hannibal would find him. Hannibal thinks Du Maurier has outdone herself. She has managed to find a being not only capable of understanding both Will and Hannibal, but a being with the potential to rend them apart.

Will will naturally want to protect what is his. As does Hannibal.

Hannibal cannot bring himself to believe Du Maurier is correct about Will. That Will had seduced him and manipulated him with cold and calculated maliciousness. Manufactured every glance, every touch? That would mean that Will had been able to immerse himself so completely in Hannibal's mind that he could behave exactly like Hannibal, a mirror image so compelling that Hannibal had lost his practice, his home, his anonymity and nearly his life just to touch that image.

We're just alike…

He's still influencing you. Will Graham asking to see you betrays his clear intent to manipulate you.

And if I agree to see Will?

It betrays your clear intent to manipulate him.

I miss him…

Then maybe you deserve each other.

We're just alike…

He realized early on that he saw things differently than other people, felt things differently.

So did you.

I see myself in Will.

Do you see yourself in his madness?

We're just alike…

Had Hannibal seen only his reflection in those pale blue eyes? Had he been so desperate to believe that he had allowed himself to be tricked by Will? He had told Will they were alone without each other. Had reinforced it systematically by removing everyone he cared about. He had spoken the words like a mantra, so Will had repeated it, time and again and Hannibal had been content he had internalized it. Hannibal wonders now which of them had actually internalized it.

I have to confess that I don't know who's pursuing whom any more than these fish do.

Whomever is pursuing whom in this very moment, I intend to eat them.

Uncle Jack's words begin to carry the tone of a taunt. Jack could not have been inferring that Hannibal was the prey in their merry chase; that Hannibal was the one being pursued and was about to be devoured by Will. Jack had not sat there in his own dining room mocking him, laughing beneath the veneer of friendship at Hannibal's conceit.

The thought is insufferable. Hannibal can almost feel the chilled flesh of fish slathered in gelatin upon his palm and he clenches his fist imagining blood slipping like pulp between his fingers as snippets of conversations continue to slip around his skull.

He's still influencing you. Will Graham asking to see you betrays his clear intent to manipulate you.

And if I agree to see Will?

It betrays your clear intent to manipulate him.

I miss him.

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

I'm intrigued.

Obsessively.

And he will take advantage of that.

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

Hannibal slams his fist upon the table unnerving the twins in the process. Hannibal becomes aware he has been staring at the ripe flesh of strawberries in his hand and in his haze had seen drops of blood. He stands up quickly and grabs a napkin. He will let the twins infer what they want from his momentary lapse from the present. Luciano could probably do with a little reminder of the nature of the man who holds him and his sister captive.

Hannibal retrieves a pair of rubber gloves from atop the table where his surgical instruments sit sheathed in a sheet of plastic. He commences removing dirty plates from under stunned faces.

Will's true emotions *had* made appearances. There *had* been truth beneath the lies and deceptions. There had been the salon. Will had been his in the salon. And Hannibal had been Will's. Will had allowed Hannibal to see him. As much as he had dared let Hannibal see before walking again into the light of the kitchen and the harsh reality of the universe each of them despised but had been forced to acknowledge and endure. If only Will had allowed himself to truly abandon his world, forsake it for the one Hannibal had made…with Abigail.

With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you.

Will always was…is unpredictable. As alike as they are, Hannibal has never been able to know with any degree of certainty Will's mind. Will is fascinatingly unfathomable. Will is unique.

Will was his once…his.

And he will be again.

Hannibal dismisses his doubt; removes it like the clutter he now clears from the folded table where the twins sit quietly waiting for Hannibal's storm to pass. He ignores them. Reflection is good for the soul, even debauched souls such as the Paolini.

Hannibal wonders at the reflection mirrored in Will's mind as he settles in with Clayton this evening. When Will lies prone upon his pillow, his fingers wandering across his wound what tempts his gaze as Morpheus steals him away? Does he favor the starry heavens with his penetrating pale blue eyes or does he favor the new star lying beside him, freshly fallen to bask in the warm glow of a gaze once again fixed upon earth forsaking heaven.

Du Maurier could but suffer Hannibal's inspirations only to a point and she had reached that point with Will. Two was company, three…a crowd. The similarities do not escape Hannibal. Hannibal does not desire a…crowd, either.

Clayton is not Will. As intuitive as he is, there are no violent urges simmering in the depths of his mind waiting to be brought forth. Unless, in the course of his therapy with Will, he identifies too closely with his patient and Will's inspirations become his. A provocative question soon to be addressed with Hannibal's invitation. Psychopaths are particularly exceptional at applying the methods of their madness.

"Lucia," Hannibal turns from the large plastic bin he uses to take the dirty dishes up and down the stairs and removes the gloves from his hands. "Let your brother guide you back to bed. I will be back in a moment."

Lucia nods as she looks sideways at her brother. Hannibal knows Luciano has some questions to raise right about now, but he doesn't dare. He rises from his chair and holds out a hand to his sister. Hannibal hefts the heavy bin out the door and up the stairs, closing the door behind him. It locks every time and Hannibal will have to unlock it again when he comes down. A necessary inconvenience and one he will soon be relieved of.

After setting the bin upon the kitchen counter, Hannibal turns his attentions to the large box in foyer, surrounded by smaller boxes delivered yesterday and still unopened. Hannibal takes a deep breath and begins to lug the heavy but sturdy cardboard box down the stairs to the basement. The package is for Luciano.

Luciano and Lucia look up from their beds, having retreated to their respective sources of comfort in the wake of Hannibal's outburst. Lucia scowls to conceal the dread creeping into her addled mind while Luciano scowls to mask whatever fear swarms under the surface. But curiosity rears, no matter how morbid, and Luciano slides from the mattress to stand beside the bed, toes tapping against the cement as he watches Hannibal set the container upright from beneath bushy brows.

"What is that? What do you torture us with now?"

"Not torture, Luciano. Redemption."

"What do you mean, redemption?"

"A means to redeem yourselves for offenses against me. You think perhaps I have not punished you enough?"

"No, no. You punish more than enough. You would let us go?"

"Well, to *let* you go would be inaccurate. But the tools of your deliverance have arrived."

Luciano's face winces, likely from thinking too much. Hannibal knows he should cease with the vagaries but he can't help himself. The looks on their faces are wrought with a confusion bordering on the Dickensian. Hannibal feels like Ebenezer on Christmas morning.

"What is in the box that will uh…redeem us?"

“The box is for you, Luciano. Go ahead, open it.”

Luciano approaches the box with obvious trepidation mingled with curiosity and perhaps, his large brown eyes gleam with hope as he takes the scissors from Hannibal’s hands. There is no hesitation as he slices the tape that seals the cardboard. Luciano holds the scissors with a fondness of a hunter fondling his knife. Hannibal thinks that a good sign. Luciano will need his hunter’s instincts.

As Luciano opens the box and peers inside, he steps back and lifts his head a quizzical look on his face.

“This is a…treadmill. What does a treadmill have to do with…redemption?”

“You have a job to do for your employer, Mr. Verger?”

“Yes, but…”

“I intend for you to complete it. Well, part of it.”

“I don’t understand…what job?”

“Mr. Verger expects you to capture and kill me and Mr. Graham. I will grant you the opportunity to fulfill one of those directives.”

“You want me to kill Graham?”

“That would be the most reasonable assumption, would it not?”

Luciano looks aside, his brain saturated with too much information to process. Hannibal decides to spell it out for him. Talking to him is rapidly becoming too tedious to endure.

“Mr. Verger wants you and Graham to die…in a very specific way. I won’t be doing the job he wants.”

“Well, he’ll have to learn to live with disappointment. I’m sure he is already well acquainted with that particular emotion. What you should be concerned with, Luciano, is what I want.”

Hannibal looks to Lucia still seated on her bed, but bursting with agitation. She twitches with it from the top of her head to the toes that dig into the blankets.

“Even if I kill Graham, Mr. Verger and my family still want you.”

“Leave Mr. Verger to me. As for your family, I believe your vendetta as you call it can be renegotiated…with the release of you and your sister. What do you think?”

“I think maybe something like that is possible. But I have to kill Graham, first.”

“Yes. But you need your strength. So you will put this treadmill together and you will lift the weights I will bring down. I think a couple of days will be sufficient to revitalize your vigor.”

Luciano’s eyes roam over the box a thoughtful look on his face. Hannibal waits for Luciano to collect the strands of information coalescing in his frontal lobe as dopamine floods his neurons with the task of weighing his options.

“Mr. Graham carries a gun. A Glock 17.”

Hannibal raises a brow. Will had pointed the same type of gun at him in Hobbs’ kitchen.

Hannibal had been curious about what kind of gun had been pointed at him as he and Jack had looked down upon the unconscious Will slumped on the floor, Jack’s bullet lodged in his shoulder. Separating Will from his guns would become a necessary part of his becoming. Hannibal had decided to familiarize himself with Will’s weapons because of this illuminating encounter.

Hannibal had stood next to Jack, the pistol still smoking hot from firing in his right hand while his left hand had cradled a jaw slack with remorse. Hannibal had moved to stand over Will, kicking his gun toward Jack before he had crouched beside him on the blood streaked floor.

“What type of gun is that?”

Hannibal had received a most confounded look at his inquiry. Perhaps his timing could have been better.

“What kind of question is that?” Jack had snapped.

“Will just tried to kill me. I’d like to know what he aimed at my face.”

Jack had turned his head slowly, “Will had a Glock 17 on you.“ Jack had set his gun on the counter, his eyes fixed upon Will’s gun at his feet.

“Mine’s a Walther PKK. Either one will drop you with a head shot.”

Hannibal had nodded and after a moment had asked, “Are there any bullets in Will’s gun?”

Jack had stood motionless for several seconds. He had looked at his gloved hands and back to Will’s Glock on the floor. Within seconds, Jack was holding the Glock in his hands, slipping out the magazine.

“It’s uh…fully loaded, Doctor Lecter.” Jack had said, his face grim.

Hannibal had merely nodded while silently applauding the killer splayed beautifully on the floor beside him. He had turned his head back to Will, had gazed upon his blood soaked shirt and looked into his blood splattered face. A foreshadowing of things to come. Hannibal had not imagined he would again find himself gazing into Will’s blood drenched face on his own kitchen floor. They had come full circle.

Hannibal will see who ends up on the kitchen floor this time.

“Luciano, he may have a gun but I can guarantee that he will not be using it. Not if you follow my instructions. Do we understand one another?”

“You will let me and my sister go if I kill Graham? What about my family?”

“If you do not kill him, there is no reason for me to contact your family is there?”

Luciano shakes his head. This is all very sudden and very confusing for him. Hannibal understands.

“Luciano, if you succeed, you will be permitted to contact your family and broker the deal with them yourself. I will keep Lucia here as insurance. I have no reason to lie to you. If I do not keep my word, your family will continue to hunt me down.”

“That is true. But why not kill Graham yourself?”

“Because he does not know I am here. No one does. Why put myself at risk when you will do it for me? When you approach him, he will not know why. Not at first.”

Hannibal watches Luciano consider the proposition. Will should be expecting Luciano, but perhaps not. He twists in his inferno, trapped by his past. He may exist in the past and if that is the case, his thinking remains in the past. Luciano’s visit should provide him with a jolt that will shake that tousled head of curls into the present.

“Luciano! What choice do we have? I have already lost an arm. What more does he have to take from me? Luciano!”

“I will do it. *Benedetto Dio*, I will do it.” Luciano says, making the sign of the cross across his chest.

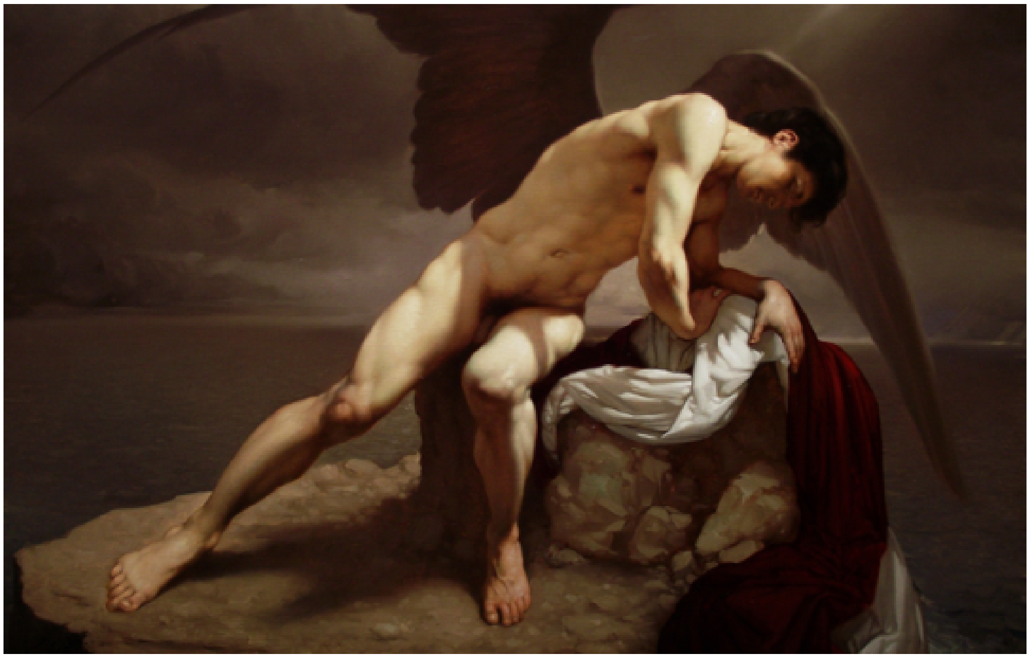
“Good. Then take your equipment out of the box and put it together. I want you up and running as soon as possible.”

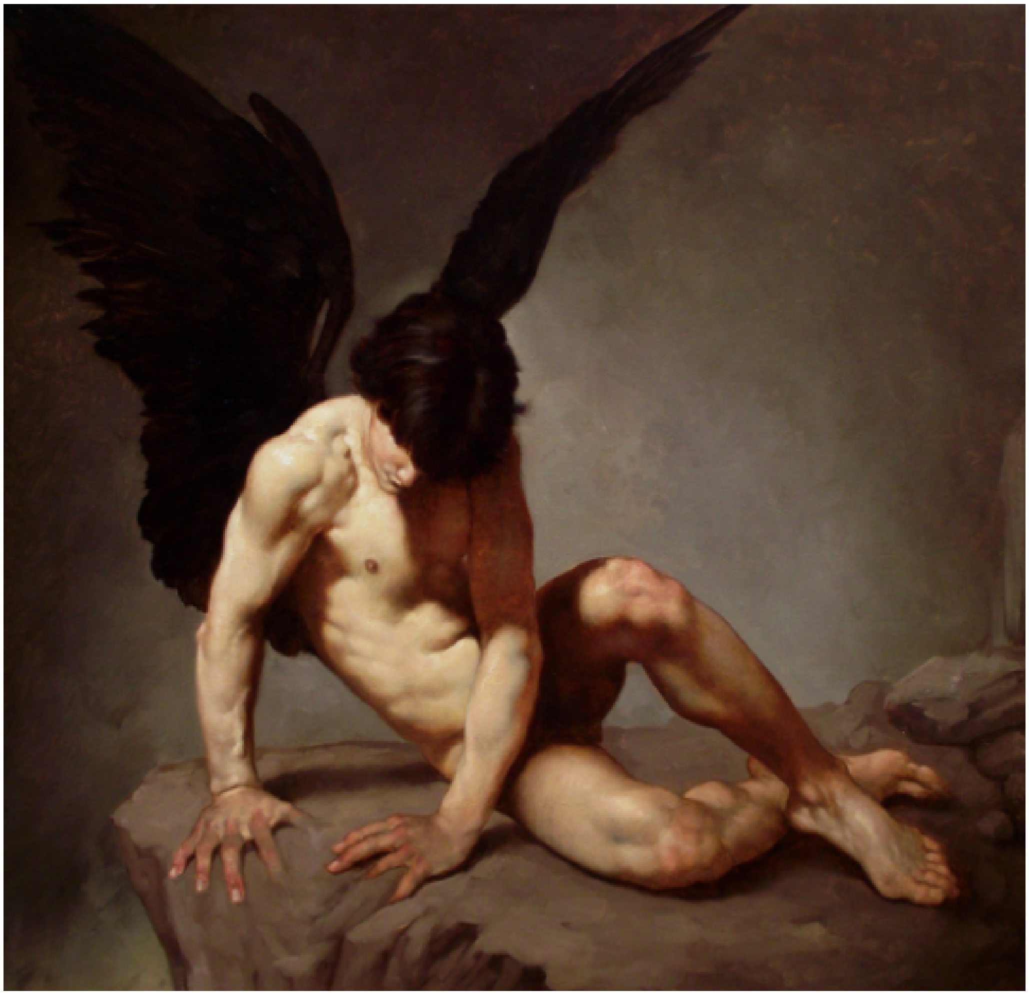
Luciano swallows and turns the box long ways on the floor. He begins emptying the box of its contents. As he looks at the brochure and directions, he waves a hand at Hannibal.

“Hey, I’m a gonna need a tool box, *si che ok*?”

“Whatever you need, Luciano.” Hannibal says.

As Hannibal starts up the stairs to retrieve his toolbox for Luciano, a passage from Nietzsche’s *All Too Human*, comes to mind. In reality, hope is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs man's torments. Luciano is about to prove Nietzsche correct.





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Daniel sits across from Will at the kitchen table sipping at his second cup of coffee watching Will with amusement as he attempts to balance the precariously piled scrambled eggs on his toast and guide the toppling mess into his mouth before spilling it. Will observes Daniel watching him and successfully manages to take a bite, and grins between munches, vindicated.

Watching Will eat is a sensual experience. Daniel has to force himself not to stare. Between the soft damp curls and the hint of muscle beneath the tee and of course, the mouth in between, there is no escaping the feast for the eyes he is. As if he weren't desirable enough sitting there fresh from the shower and licking his fingers, he is emotionally calm this morning. No storm behind the ocean of blue, no anger or frustration bubbling beneath the surface. Just watching him breathe is sending Daniel's imagination into hyper-drive.

Daniel sighs softly and looks out the window. *Damn him.*

Will refrains from pouring more ketchup on his plate. Daniel makes a truly fine breakfast and Will thinks dumping condiments all over it might come off as insulting. He decides the Italian bread and Daniel's omelet, a scramble by default, tastes pretty good without anything else. He glances at Daniel as he gazes out the window and thinks he should have stepped into the shower with him this morning. Those soft green eyes get him all the time. And the mouth… Will stabs at the eggs. He rolls the eggs around his tongue imagining what might have been.

They had turned in early and had spent another restless night, tossing and turning, some of the tossing and turning actually pleasurable. Between the humidity and the dreams, Daniel is not sure which had affected them the most. Daniel had dreamed of an open air summer concert amid the ruins of an amphitheater, haunting melodies floating above the crumbling walls until creatures descended from the skies, plucking off people left and right, vultures and winged jackals hunting at will. Daniel can only imagine what Will had been dreaming about to cause his own dreams to turn vicious and violent all night long.

Daniel shifts his thoughts to their duet last evening. They will be discussing dreams again soon enough. Will doesn't know it, but he had not only piled eggs onto his seeded rye this morning, he had been topping his morning toast with Daniel's blend of hallucinogens. Daniel expects the drugs to kick in soon; in perhaps twenty minutes Will will begin to feel the effects.

For the next several hours, Daniel is prepared to enter Will's dreamscape come what may. Daniel shifts in his seat feeling a familiar teasing tickle begin to work its way from his brain downward to settle between his legs. He leans over the table on his elbows and looks directly at Will.

"What?" Will says looking up at him.

The startled look on Will's face melts into grin and Daniel rolls his eyes. Will's timing is really off this morning. Daniel considers a little sex might provide a nice segue into the hypnotherapy, but chances are that it will set the stage so well that the entire play would remain in the first act and there are other parts of Will's imagination that require exploring. There is a procedure to be followed and Daniel suspects that sex might find its way into the therapy anyway.

Daniel figures he may as well begin setting the stage.

"You uh, screwed up on your timing again last night." Daniel chides from his side of the table.

"You are talking about the duet and not…" Will kicks at his bare feet under the table. Raises his brows.

"The duet, yes."

Daniel shakes his head trying to clear it of images of twisted limbs and very naughty pale blue eyes. Of course, Will would be playful this morning. He just has to be perfectly…perfect on a morning when Daniel can't take advantage of... It occurs to Daniel that the drugs might be kicking in. Losing one's inhibitions would be on the menu.

"I can't help it." Will says reaching for his coffee to wash down the eggs and toast. "Seems I learned it that way and can't seem to correct it. Like mispronouncing the name of a town or street the first time and never being able to say right after that."

"Habits. Hard to break, aren't they?" He says as he lights a cigarette. His first of the day.

Will sets down his fork, leaving the eggs on his plate. "And what habits would we be referring to, doctor?"

Daniel smiles, "Which ones come to mind?"

"Stop doing that." Will says. "Always this…answering questions with another question."

"How does that make you feel?"

Will raises his brows and contemplates how it would feel to chuck a hunk of toast across the table. Instead, he gives Daniel's question the serious consideration it deserves.

"We're talking about actual habits, not compulsions or disorders?" Will says watching the smoke drift out the windows.

"A fine line. How do habits form?"

"Repetition. Positive reinforcement."

"Okay. And where do habits come from?" Daniel glances at Will's unfinished breakfast.

Will picks up his fork and takes another mouthful of very spicy scrambled eggs. Daniel had gone wild on the fresh peppers he had picked this morning. He thinks maybe Daniel had not rinsed all the dirt from them.

"Come from? From the things we do every day. Routines. And we apply the routines to new situations, because the routine makes us feel comfortable with the new routine or experience."

"And habits are coping mechanisms. I will automatically light a cigarette when I'm stuck in traffic. I will have one or crave one before meeting people I don't know, like at a party or a conference. And I am conscious that I do it. So what that does that suggest about me?"

"That you need a buffer between transitions. A break to give yourself time to adapt while creating a bridge. You use the positive associations you get from smoking to emotionally bridge the gap between comfort and discomfort, from familiar to new. And the nicotine helps."

“Yeah, it does. But that’s uh, pretty accurate. Your mind works very differently from mine, but the parts are all the same, the chemistry is the same. What habits do you engage when making transitions?”

“Like when I transition from one state of consciousness to another?” Will yawns and takes another sip of coffee.

“That would be the one. You don’t have to tell me your habits. I just want you to think about them. Habits come in many forms and when you dream, or hallucinate, or do your profiling thing, you involuntarily adopt your habits. Habits of mind, not just physical manifestations.”

“I retreat into my mind as I make associations. I can’t help that.”

“Do you enjoy it? That is, is it a comfortable place to be in?”

“Sometimes. Depends on the associations.”

“But is it a comfortable process for you? It happens, but you can make it happen, too. You can withdraw anytime you like.”

“So you imply retreating into my subconscious has become a habit. A habit I use to avoid rather than as a bridge.”

“Do you?”

“I told you to stop that.”

“Will, you could make that musical transition correctly if you imagined yourself playing it. But sitting there in real time trying to do it is more difficult. When you have to deal with new situations, or change, or something you don’t want to deal with, you retreat. Forcing ourselves to break habits is also difficult. We almost always need another habit to help break the old habit by transitioning into the new one.”

“What’s it like being too smart for your own good?”

“Awesome. What’s it like having me tell you things you already know?”

“Comforting…like…” Will says suddenly distracted.

Daniel watches Will zone out as he takes another drag off his cigarette.

Will could swear he was moving backward a moment ago. He stares at the glint of sunlight sparkle on the utensils. He thinks the room a little brighter than it was a moment ago. His eyes are drawn to the smoke curling up from Daniel’s cigarette and he leans back in his chair to watch the smoke curls rise to the ceiling before dissolving into fine white dust that seems to roll slowly out the window.

“There’s a lot of dust floating up there,” Will points at the ceiling, head back against the chair. “Can you see it catching the light all around the fan?”

Daniel nods, “Uh huh.”

As he leans in closer he can see Will's pupils have begun to dilate. He figures he should start explaining while Will is still relatively clearheaded. If he can draw Will's attention away from the ceiling.

"Will? We were talking about transitions and I'd like to…"

Will shakes his head from side to side wondering at how it feels heavy and empty at the same time. Like marbles rolling around in air except it is in his head and he feels... He looks back down at the table. He thinks Daniel just said something. As the utensils begin to shimmer on the table he recognizes the points of glittering light all over the table for what they are. He lifts his head slowly to look at Daniel. He closes his eyes for a moment. Daniel is shimmering, too.

"Therapy today?" he says slowly.

"Um…wow. That hit you quicker than I thought. How do you feel?"

"I'd say…angry, but I'm too buzzed to…Shit, Daniel. A *little* warning? You put it in the food?"

"Some palate you have. I was sure you'd taste it."

Will rubs at his face and it feels like moving putty around. He feels the panic rising and pushes it down, or tries to. He reminds himself Daniel is right there across the table. They have talked about this. He gave Daniel his permission. He sits up straight and takes a deep breath, lets it out really slowly. He takes another.

"That's good, Will. Keep doing that while I talk. I'm going to check your blood pressure, ok?"

"Good idea." Will says watching him get up and cross the kitchen.

Daniel pulls his medical bag out of the kitchen closet, checks it for the third time to make sure everything is where it should be. He doesn't want to have to rummage around for something in an emergency. As he wraps the rubber around Will's bicep to check his blood pressure, he nudges Will's head with his own.

"You'll be ok. I know I caught you off guard, but this has to be as spontaneous as I can make it."

"I know. You told me."

"The dizziness will pass once your body gets acclimated. In a little while, your brain will compensate and movement will feel normal to you. The entire experience will feel real. It's supposed to."

"Except in my head, I'll be someplace else." Will frowns and leaves the rest of the bundle of worry unspoken.

Daniel notes the frown and the furrowed brow. It's the drugs he thinks. He knows Will has a negative view of drugs and given his past experience Daniel understands. Drugs have been given to him to limit or control his mind, not free it.

"You do trust me, right?"

"A little late to ask, don't you think?"

"Just checking your sense of humor. Still intact."

"Daniel, I'm…" Will swallows, closes his eyes. "You are familiar with my dreams from talking about them. This is…really *intimate*."

"Boundaries, Will. Barriers and boundaries."

"Are we crossing them or negotiating them?"

"Navigating."

Will looks up at Daniel from his chair. He searches Daniel's face and imagines their situations reversed. He would be looking down at Daniel with similar concern and…affection. There is a quiet determination about him that shines in his eyes, a calm sea of gentle waves breaking upon the shore, unfailing and constant.

Will has shared a lot with Daniel. He knew this was coming, but he feels so exposed, so vulnerable. He thinks maybe his unease is less about showing Daniel his innermost universe, and more about him actually seeing it. About *seeing* him.

See. See?

Daniel takes advantage of the lull in conversation to look at his watch to finish taking Will's blood pressure. Will is very healthy physically. His blood pressure is naturally low to begin with. Even when he awakens panicked in a cold sweat, the heart that beats beneath Daniel's hand thumps hard, but strong and steady.

"You're afraid. How could you not be? The best way for you to look at this is to think the about the drugs as enhancing your experience. Or, don't think about them at all. Like the pot we smoked. We got high and just enjoyed it. You had really vivid dreams, too."

"Yeah, I did. I'll um…try and *enjoy* it." Will offers a weak smile and looks down at his arm as Daniel lifts the cool metal of the stethoscope from his skin.

Daniel unties the band. "Your blood pressure is good. A little high for you but I expected that. I'm going to have you do some counting and breathing to keep it where it is. I'm glad you had the MRI done otherwise I'd have had to ask to take your blood pressure for a baseline. What a hint that would have been."

"How high is it?"

"Not much, a little elevated is all. You don't need to know the numbers. You'll obsess on them. I'm the doctor so let me do my job."

Will leans into Daniel so his head rests against his ribcage and feels Daniel's arm across his shoulders immediately. He thinks of sand and salty air and breathes a sigh of relief when he feels the sensation of soft mist around him. His body begins to relax though his head floats and objects continue to shimmer.

Daniel massages Will's shoulder and feels the tension recede beneath his fingers as the anxiety abates.

LSD and other hallucinogens can be cut with strychnine and other substances, and can cause the same muscle contractions as rat poison, but Daniel isn't using anything like those. These psilocybin mushrooms are about as untouched and organic as one can get. Will is tense because he is stressed.

Daniel can't regress Will until he's in a calm emotional state. Daniel will know when he is. He has not ever done this particular therapy with a patient. Well, not all the components at the same time. He does know he will be relying on his empathy to guide him and Will through the therapy.

Will's presence is powerful enough without drugs. Will poses unique challenges because he is unique. Daniel reminds himself that he has been over this in his head many times; he has thought this through and tried to plan for every contingency. There are always unknowns. Daniel needs to present to Will as confident and in control despite feeling a little afraid, too.

"I want you to breathe in slow and count that as one. When you exhale, count that as two. Count to ten and then count backwards to one again. I'll stand right here. You can keep your head where it is. I like that."

Daniel can feel Will's grudging approval as he takes a deep breath and begins to count. Daniel places two fingers over his jugular and counts as he listens to Will.

"Okay. You continue relaxing while I talk. I'm going to regress you into a lucid dream state. Like hypnosis but not exactly. You are tripping so putting you under completely is uh…not what we want here."

"What is it we want exactly?"

"We want insight and answers. After I regress you into a simple relaxed dream state, you'll free associate. I can let you do that for a bit, but I am going to guide you into conversations and you will respond without hesitation or inhibition. If I had not given you hallucinogens you would hesitate and you would block anything you didn't want to talk about. With me so far?"

"Um…yes."

"I will be present and talking to you the entire time. I will be prompting you and listening to your responses, and adjusting to your responses. You will invariably retreat, as is your habit…"

Daniel pauses to squeeze Will's shoulders for emphasis.

"Go on."

"And you'll imagine things. You'll respond to my questions and prompts but you may not be aware of me."

"How do you mean?"

"You may not see *me* all of the time. I may appear as someone else. You might internalize my suggestions but you may not be aware of actually hearing them. I'm not sure how all this will manifest, Will. I can give you my best guess. You will be in an alternate reality. I may pop in and pop out. I may stand in for other people. I am sharing it with you from the outside, but feeling your emotions."

"You'll become part of my imagination. Sort of." Will cringes inside and thinks of Mason.

No, no, no…don't go there. You will really have a nightmare then… Will tells himself.

"That's the idea. I gave you a really tiny dose. You should start to come down in about four hours and once you start coming down, it will be another hour or so before you feel yourself again. You won't be completely yourself until tomorrow morning."

"Will I be walking around or confined to the chair the whole time?"

"I'll give you the range of the house, but we won't go outside. Can't have you running and screaming down the street."

"Expecting a lot of screaming?" Will says, feeling at ease enough to joke around.

He is feeling more comfortable with the idea of the therapy. Daniel always makes him feel comfortable. It is a gift and Will thinks he never tells Daniel and he should. Will's mind spins with ocean breezes and the scent of brine and salt air. Will thinks the drugs are affecting him a little too much.

"Let's go sit on the couch and get comfortable. These chairs sure won't be after a while."

"I should remember this, right? You didn't give me anything that would impair my short term memory?"

"I hope not. You shouldn't be impaired in any way, except that you are hallucinating. All your mental faculties are intact. The drugs and the regression should allow you to remember even things you don't want to. Which is the point."

Will gets up and finds his legs remarkably steady. He seems to be moving slowly but maybe it just feels that way. He follows Daniel to the couch adjusting to the sensations and altered perception as he walks. He feels more in control now that the initial shock has subsided. He decides he feels like he smoked an entire joint by himself. Will remembers reading a list of slang terms for marijuana from the FBI's data base. He had been amazed there had been hundreds of terms from A to Z…

"Will?"

"I'm here."

"I want you to count backwards from twenty."

"Why twenty?"

"Because they are my instructions and I want you to follow them. Are you going to imagine you're twelve the entire time or just for now?"

Daniel adopts an authoritative tone to dissuade any further argument. He needs to establish some mental boundaries and Will needs to accept those boundaries. The most important boundary is Daniel. Will has to listen to him once he goes under. If he continues to perceive himself autonomous, Daniel might not be able to adequately control the situation. He also has to introduce an exit word, a word to bring him back.

He needs to establish these safeguards quickly. Will is already far enough along as it is.

"Sorry." Will offers a smile. He wasn't trying to be difficult…

"When you have counted back to one, I'm going to have you repeat a word I'll use to bring you back, okay?"

"Okay. Start counting now?"

"Yes. Close your eyes."

Daniel waits for Will to close his eyes and start counting. He rises from the couch to turn on the music. He created a playlist especially for the therapy. Selections he knows will invite all the requisite associations he wants Will to make. When he returns to the couch Will is just about finished counting. The counting had no purpose other than to have Will follow his instructions. Now, Daniel is sure he will do so without question.

The melodic strains of Vivaldi's *Summer* sweep the room gently, a dusting of sound that settles quietly, invitingly.

"Two…one."

"Keep your eyes closed. I'm going to regress you now. We're going to take a trip to do that, someplace you know and someplace safe. Before we do, I want you to remember our exit word. It's the same word I'll use to bring you back, but you can use it anytime you want to leave. I'll reinforce the word while I regress you. Okay?"

"Where are we going?"

"Wolf Trap."

Will smiles and nods. Of course Daniel would start there.

"What's the uh…exit word?"

"Well, it has to be something you wouldn't say in the course of conversation, but that's sort of hard to anticipate considering the situation. And you'd have to associate it with an exit."

"What did you come up with?"

"Ticket."

"Ticket?"

"Yeah, if you hear me talking about tickets, it's time to go. If you start talking about tickets, I'll bring you back."

"How is that associated with an exit?"

"I've got your ticket, Will, time to leave."

"That's pretty good. You've um…really thought this through."

"As best I could. You're not alone, Will. I'll be right beside you…Ready?"

Will opens his eyes to the sun peeking out from behind drawn beige shades covering familiar paned windows that frame the corner of his bed. He notices his front door has been flung open, the dogs are nowhere in sight and he hears…laughter outside. He throws the sheet and blanket off and pulls on the pair off loose fitting jeans and button down flannel shirt that hang over one of living room chairs. He walks through the open door to stand on his porch, shoes dangling from his hands as he watches a girl dressed in khakis and a light vest throwing sticks for the dogs. He counts. All seven of them.

The dogs hear him and begin to run at the house, Winston first. The girl turns her head with the tide of fur, and Will can clearly see the large blue eyes gazing at him as her mouth falls open in a wide tooth filled smile.

"Abigail?"

"*I was wondering when you'd wake up and come outside. Where are we?"*

"Wolf Trap. My house…what are you doing here?"

Will sits on the porch steps and pulls the shoes on over his thick socks. Abigail walks over, dogs trailing behind her, and sits next to him on the steps.

"I think they're hungry."

"I'm sure they are…hey guys. Good morning, huh?"

Will finds himself buried in a collage of fur and wet muzzles as Abigail laughs again. He sits up straight and takes in the freckled cheeks and nose, the hair braided and hanging off to one side. His eyes alight on the scar along her throat, quickly covered by tremulous fingers.

"I still cover it up most of the time, but you already know it's…there. Are you going to make breakfast?"

"Um…yeah. What do you want?"

"Well, something quick. We don't want to be late."

"Late for what?"

"The sacrifice. And I probably shouldn't eat too much, because you know how people lose their uh…insides when they die."

Will grabs Abigail's shoulders and turns her to face him. *"What sacrifice are you talking about?"*

"You know what sacrifice." Abigail frowns and pulls back away from Will, just out of his reach. *"He'll come for me, and you know that, too, Will. You already know."*

"We could stop him."

"How? What happened had to happen. You can't change it now. You can only learn from why it happened."

"Why the sacrifice? Why did it have to be you?"

I don't need a sacrifice, do you?

"I was always meant for you. A surrogate daughter."

"For both of us. Two fathers."

"But you loved me more. And he…loved you more."

"You don't know that."

"Who did he choose, Will? Who did he choose?"

The dogs whine restlessly and all of them turn toward the trees in the distance. Will looks up with Abigail and they watch a figure emerge from the canopy of red and orange approaching with a familiar measured gait.

"No time for breakfast." Abigail murmurs.

"There's never enough time…" Will says standing up to greet Hannibal.

Hannibal wears thick brown leggings and boots beneath a tan colored tunic. A long cloak lined with fur drapes from his shoulders held in place by a clasp of twin snakes entwined and writhing in gold. He shakes his mane of long blonde braids and holds out his hand to Abigail.

"Hello, Will. Come, Abigail."

Abigail turns to Will, her expression sorrowful. *"Goodbye, Will."* She touches his arm lightly as she rises from the steps to take Hannibal's hand.

Will stands up and quickly places himself between Hannibal and Abigail.

"Why the sacrifice? You said you didn't need one. Why couldn't you take her with you?" Will looks into the dark eyes that hold him paralyzed, again.

"The life to which she was born was taken from her. I made her another life. Your actions robbed her of that."

"You should have told me about your other life."

"I did, but you would not see it."

"Vagaries. Lies and deceptions."

"Opportunities. Lost with tragic consequences."

"You were supposed to leave."

"You were supposed to choose. You did not. So, I made the choice. Come Abigail, it is time."

Abigail walks from behind Will to take her place beside Hannibal. He draws her close so she stands in front facing Will.

"No… You haven't told me why you couldn't take her with you, just punish me."

"She already has. I had to sacrifice one to make a life with the other. I chose you. I left you to the Fates and your choices. A habit of yours I think you recognize all too well."

The sun shrinks behind clouds as Hannibal draws a sword from the depths of his cloak, pummel dark carnelian in his hands, as though already stained with her blood.

"*How many lies have had to be sanctified? How many consciences devastated? How many sacrifices?"*

"How many sacrifices has God made? If the war of Troy were a shattered tea cup, its shards strewn across time, where would you begin to pick up the pieces, Will?"

"You mean a time before the tea cup shatters?"

"Yes, Will. How did the war begin? The fleet has already sailed upon the winds of her sacrifice. Will you let her sacrifice go to waste? Another life still beckons for Achilles and he would that his Patroclus join him still."

As the sun emerges from the clouds its light catches bright upon the blade Hannibal raises high in the air. Will lunges at the stilled figures of Hannibal and Abigail and…

…lands upon hard ground as smoke and gravel fill his nostrils. Will looks around at his inferno. He pushes himself off the sooty ground to his knees and feels the aching of his shoulders as black wings rise from his back to steady him. His eyes are drawn to the silky black down that sprouts between his legs obscuring cock and balls and creeps up to his navel. He cranes his neck and reaches a hand up to feel soft curls at his neck and touch whiskers that are but a shadow of stubble across his face.

Will can handle a few feathers between his legs, what concern him is that the feathers seem to cover a little more of him each time he enters his inferno. He knows they sprout from his back and the wings seem fuller this time.

A rustling of feathers he knows are not his own cause him to lift his eyes. Daniel stands over him, as naked as he is, his wings frosty white contrasting sharply with the thick downy thatch of black that meets Will's eyes. The thatch is not so thick that Will can see that he stares at no angel. Except for the wings, he is quite human.

Winged Daniel inclines his head and holds out his hand to Will.

Will accepts the outstretched hand and lets Daniel guide him to his feet. The green eyes staring intently into his are alive and glittering like jewels in this place that reeks of death. Will can see the charred remains of Daniel's house behind him, rubble and splintered beams covered in ash.

"Are you okay? You went down pretty hard." The winged Daniel asks, brushing the curls from Will's eyes.

"I'm uh…yeah." Will says, momentarily confused. Something feels different. Daniel but not Daniel looks back at him, face serene as his fingers pluck at Will's hair.

"What do you see?" Daniel asks.

Daniel stands facing a dazed Will in the living room. Will had collapsed onto the rug from the couch a moment ago, eyes open but far away. Will is still in his hypnotically induced trance though a part of him recognizes Daniel and Daniel needs only the vaguest of cues from Will to guide him back into his dreamscape.

Will stares into the familiar face, as smoke drifts up from the crusty earth to curl around the frosty wings that flutter slightly in the stillness. But this is the Daniel from his inferno. A representation. A fragment of himself. He's tripping…

"I see…you, Daniel."

Will says knowing he's not really seeing the Daniel he knows. But that's what Daniel said would happen. Will lets the tether twisting in his mind snap. He watches winged Daniel's lips move.

"Okay. What else do you see?" The pink lips part, soft breath mingles with his own.

"Your house. What's left of it, right behind you."

Daniel turns around, scans the fireplace and turns back to Will. He knows where they are.

He watches Will flinch as he stands flexing back muscles and craning his neck with elbow bent and fingers massaging his shoulder then chest as his eyes move about the room seeing a devastated landscape only he can see, one that Daniel knows only by description. Daniel realizes Will has his wings, and so then must he. Daniel sits down on the couch hoping Will follows suit. He doesn't need to stand up or walk around; his mind will do that for him.

"Are we alone?" Winged Daniel asks as he gazes about the ruins of his home.

The sky overhead darkens and the ruins around them are cast in shadow, the distant crimson orb the only light in the heavens. With the darkness comes the flapping of great wings and Will knows what stands behind him though no shadow falls upon the charcoal colored dirt.

"Not anymore." Will says, his hands finding the wound that has already begun to pulse along his flesh, the thing inside awake sensing its kind in the darkness behind him.

The creature spreads its enormous wings over Will and beckons for the white winged Daniel to join them. Daniel takes a tentative step but Will blocks his way.

"Will…" He says.

Daniel pleads with his eyes and takes another step that brings him toe to toe with Will. Will instinctively shoves him backward, Daniel's wings move quickly lifting him up and he stumbles but does not fall to the earth. He comes at Will again and Will shoves again. The shoving gives way to grappling, legs lock in place and feet seek purchase against the ground while arms and hands seek advantage over flesh.

Will doesn't want to hurt him, but if injury keeps him from the creature at his back he can live with that. Will brings an elbow up, hard slamming Daniel in the side of the head. The blow sends Daniel reeling backward and Will is right on top of him, pinning him wings and all to the ground, grinding him into the grit, and almost enjoying it. Daniel struggles beneath, legs flail and hips rise to push Will off of him, but to no avail. Daniel holds his forearm against Will's throat seeking leverage to push him off once and for all while twisting his body up off the ground and Will answers with a twist of his own. Will's wings beat furiously as he slams Daniel's shoulder into the ground knowing his wings are anchored between the flesh of shoulder blades already pressed flat into the dirt.

He hears a snap and the sob of pain that escapes Daniel tears at his heart. Will moves off Daniel and watches him roll to his side and scramble a few feet away to finally draw himself up on his knees, wings white no more as they flutter and Daniel grimaces as he looks at Will. Will sees the blood bloom through ravaged feathers to trickle onto the dirt. Daniel heaves as he rests on all fours, his back rising with every breath.

Will crouches where he is, holding his ground between Daniel and the creature that hovers at his back.

The green eyes fill with sadness but Daniel retreats to stand aside a boulder, body twisted around so he can examine his wounds.

"Still the stronger predator."

Hannibal's voice whispers in Will's ear, as feathers soft as breath caress his ears.

"That wasn't hunting. He doesn't belong here. You know that."

"He is but a messenger, Will. You look, but you do not see."

"He has delivered no message."

"You do not want to hear it."

Feathers caress his cheek, but there are fingers beneath the feathers. Will turns around and winces at the sight as the thing inside coils ever more tightly. The sting of tears is sharp as Will gazes at the dark winged figure that smiles at him in the dim light of the blood colored sun.

The serpent tailed eagle is now a serpent tailed man covered in layers of thick black feathers that lay flat against flesh and muscle, powerful and elegant, awesome and grotesque. Great wings hang dark and luminous, a cloak of black satin. A long scaly tail scrapes along the ground flicking ash in its wake. The tiny feathers ripple across his face and the lips spread wider still.

Will knows that smile and seeing it here in this desolated place leaves him cold inside, his chest aches with the burning fear that he looks at what he is becoming.

"What do you see, Will?"

"I see my future." Will says, his throat dry and voice thin.

"A future you fear. A future that surely waits if you remain here. Do you know why you are here?"

"The ninth circle. I've condemned myself. For betraying you."

"A personal betrayal. An act of hubris that invites the punishment of the gods."

"And the gods have punished me haven't they?"

Will smiles bitterly as he caresses the scar that winds along pale flesh beneath his fingers.

There is a rustling of feathers as the creature creeps closer. *"The gods didn't send you here. You punish yourself."*

"No. Punishment is for evil, not good. An act of evil perpetrated against an evil doer cannot be evil."

"If your actions were good, why are you here? And what of good and evil, Will? Still undecided and indifferent?"

"If you are evil, then so am I. That's why I am here."

"Good and evil have nothing to do with God. Or with you and I. You limit yourself. If we learn our limitations too soon…"

"We never learn our power. What power?"

"The power to leave your inferno, Will. You look but you do not see."

"See!" Daniel's voice rings out from across the desolated yard.

Will and the creature turn to see Daniel climbing up on the boulder, one wing slightly askew, to get a better look into the cratered out terraces that once adorned the hillside. He points toward the bottom of the hill. Will knows the viper has returned. He wonders if that is Daniel's message. But this isn't really Daniel, he represents something for Will and he cannot grasp what that is.

"The viper? What am I supposed to see?"

Daniel throws him an exasperated look and leans to one side of the boulder. He kneels down upon the cracked and crumbling surface to reach down low. The grey wolf emerges from the other side and as Daniel stands upright it glances down the hill before assuming its usual and welcomed place at Will's side. Will notices it doesn't seem wounded in any way and he finds that both pleasing and puzzling.

"Who is he?" Will asks.

The creature moves to stand on the other side of him, ignoring the warning growls of the wolf, its ears lay flat against its skull and a stripe of fur ripples along its back.

"On gliding wings he takes up his mask…" Hannibal's voice whispers as talon like fingers curl around his hair.

Will stands still, peering into the darkness, looking for the viper that plagues his inferno.

"All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream."

The voice is Daniel's but Will hears the words from inside his head. Daniel has not moved from his rock. He rubs at his face. All the voices are in his head. He takes a deep breath between his fingers, inhaling the dust from the scorched earth beneath his soiled feet. As he stares at his feet he feels vertigo and as he reaches out to both wolf and creature to steady him, his fingers grasp at empty space and he slips into blackness, free falling…into a bed.

Will's eyes widen as he stares at the faded tiny roses on the wallpaper.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 55 ended taking longer than anticipated. The therapy will figure prominently in Hannibal's invitation and Will's response to it. Apologies I couldn't manage the chapter in its entirety.
Here's a preview of Chapter 56 -
The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, and Hannibal’s home in Baltimore are among the final stops on Will's trip. And then, Daniel gets a taste of that crazy psychopath sex he couldn’t wait to hear about.

Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Will continues his therapy with Daniel.

The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and Hannibal's house in Baltimore are among the final stops they make on Will's trip.

Why would you want to surprise him?

He does not believe I will deliver on our little quid pro quos. I'd like to benefit from your visit.

I wonder why he doesn't believe you, Frederick. What am I being used to bargain for?

An incentive for good behavior. He has to stop biting the staff. It's getting near impossible to hire quality personnel. Punishment doesn't work, so I thought I would try rewards.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 56

Will continues his therapy with Daniel.

The Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and Hannibal's house in Baltimore are among the final stops they make on Will's trip.

The Birth of Evil, Roberto Ferri

Daniel ducks his head out of the bathroom to take a peek at Will who is reclining comfortably and more importantly, calmly on the bed. He stares at the ceiling, hands on stomach his fingers tracing over the scar he compulsively cradles through the cotton tee, but Daniel knows he is lost in his inferno. At least he is no longer crouched on the floor, every muscle taut with adrenaline while his brain swims in psilocybin.

After Will had decked him, Daniel had lain prone on the floor until Will had moved off him. Evidently, Will's imagination had not required Daniel's physical interaction. Will had spoken aloud some of his conversation, adopting all the parts himself, until Will had fallen silent; the rest of the episode had played out in his mind as Will had sat trancelike upon the couch. Daniel had been spellbound as his own body had reflected every flinch, every twitch of emotion from him.

The therapy is not going as planned. Daniel will once again experience Will's emotions without knowing what is happening in his head. Unless he wants to get decked again. And again. Imagine that.

Will is high functioning, able to process and assimilate his associations while responding to all the sensory stimuli at the same time. But, his aggressive tendencies have been enhanced by the drugs, and Will's lowered inhibitions coupled with Will's overactive imagination had resulted in Daniel finding himself staring up at Will from the rug, Will's hands trying to grip the flapping feathered wings Will imagined at his back as Will's calves and thighs had pinned his lower extremities to the floor.

Emotions had been running high, and Will had seemed to want to protect Daniel from something. Will had crouched on the floor in the living room with a very determined expression on his face but Daniel had felt the regret, too. Daniel's prompts have sent Will to Wolf Trap and his inferno so far. As far as Daniel can tell, Will is still there.

Still the stronger predator. That wasn't hunting. He doesn't belong here. You know that.

Will must have been keeping the winged version of him away from the serpent tailed eagle. Will had stopped talking after uttering those few sentences.

Daniel knows Will can assume the mindset of others without moving at all. He does not profile a crime scene by acting it out. Daniel had anticipated that Will would interact with his environment once the drugs had kicked in and he had been regressed, but Daniel had not anticipated that Will's imagination would so completely overtake him.

Will is becoming more intimate with his instincts the further into his head he goes. Daniel is not sure how much more intimacy he should invite. It is clear to Daniel that his presence can influence Will's hallucination. Rather than engage him directly, Daniel thinks it better that he keep his distance, allow Will to go where he wants on his trip with minimal interference from Daniel. Unless Will signals that interaction between them is what he wants, Daniel will guide the therapy from a safe distance.

Daniel would prefer not to engage Will physically. Will's reflexes are quick and Daniel just experienced how strong he is. He's an hour into the therapy and he is peaking. Will's adrenaline is likely spiking and Daniel thinks the pleasure centers in his brain have been activated by the near sexual pleasure he derives from exercising the aggressive tendencies. The release of dopamine will ignite more aggression which will, in turn escalate the violence. Lecter had no doubt relied on the same neural receptors to do the same thing to Will when he sent Randall Tier to his house.

But Daniel's decision had not required a complete neurological assessment. Will had quite simply knocked Daniel on his ass with one punch and it was then that Daniel had decided that perhaps a bed was safer. For him.

Daniel had led him upstairs to lie down. At least there, Daniel could keep an eye on him while he used the bathroom. The downstairs bathroom is not a full bath; the one upstairs is. Daniel had brought the medical bag up along with some snacks and drinks to camp out on the second floor. There is a lot less for Will to get into up here, and it will be a lot more difficult for him to leave the house if his associations should inspire him to embark on an odyssey of his own.

He presses the ice to his cheek as he looks in the mirror. He knew Will might get physical with him, but not quite like this. The abrasion doesn't hurt as badly as it looks and Daniel wants to minimize the swelling as much as possible. The experience is going to leave Will with plenty of emotional fall out without Daniel looking like a punching bag afterward. He may have to cancel appointments Friday should Will insist on taking more swings at him. Daniel is already feeling emotionally spent, and he isn't feeling close to what Will is feeling.

Usually, the patient sits in a chair or couch for the entire hypnotherapy. The therapy is similar to the narcoanalytic interview Chilton administered to Will, except that the patient is guided to explore or remember an event, often from childhood or trauma. Restraints would not be required, unless the patient had displayed aggressive tendencies or was considered violent and hostile, as Will had been viewed under Chilton's care. Such a patient would be considered resistant to therapy. In a clinical setting at a hospital for criminals, sodium amytal would be the drug of choice to elicit the hoped for truthful responses.

But Will's brain has been exposed to these sorts of drugs and Daniel thinks that he may have built a resistance to them, or at least his brain has. Daniel doesn't know how Will's mind works nor how it does what it does, but he is certain Will's neural pathways can find alternate routes around the usual suspects and for that reason he had opted for the hallucinogens instead. The hallucinogens would lower his inhibitions and would add fuel to the fire of his imagination.

Daniel thinks he may have overdone it on the fuel part. Will is much more active and ambulatory than expected, acting out his hallucinations rather than simply answering questions and role playing as Daniel had imagined. Will continues to prove he is consistently unpredictable. He considers Will is resisting in his own way. Habits of mind.

He had hopes of seeing Will through the fractured pieces represented by the people and creatures in his dreams and hallucinations. But Will seems to barely acknowledge him unless provoked. Daniel has had to manage his expectations. Daniel's presence in real time cannot compete with the scenery and sensation in Will's head. The best Daniel has been able to do is capture Will's attention briefly, dust him off, and gently send him back into the ring.

Will is unique in his ability to empathize. His perception of other people's intentions and motivation is dead on, embellished by his apparent eidetic memory. Associations come quickly as his compulsion to make associations, assimilate, and synthesize everything he sees and touches, is relentless and never ending. He can no more stop doing it than he could stop breathing.

Daniel thinks that Will's need for isolation arose in childhood. The mirrors in his mind absorbed too much from the other children, and he would have retreated to protect himself. What he absorbed from adults he would have been unable to comprehend…at first. He would have learned quickly to manage his responses around adults. Daniel thinks he began feigning his antisocial disorders about the same time he figured out it was easier to pretend ignorance than to ask questions. Satisfying one's curiosity had become a covert operation out of necessity. Exclusion by design.

He had learned to insulate himself from the constant barrage of sensation around him, unable to process them because he had been too young to have a frame of reference. And the more isolated he became, the more finely attuned his empathy became. Will has been building forts for a very long time.

When Will began to start putting himself inside other people's heads is anyone's guess. His powers of observation grew over time and since Will spent so much time alone, he perfected his ability.

Daniel imagines the images dancing behind those pale blue eyes would have shut most children down. The adults around him would not have known *what* was different about Will; they would have known only that he *was* different from other children. And while most children are protected from the adult world of sex, violence, and death; Will was not. Will's innate intelligence is what saved him. Once he had started making and cataloging associations, his own childhood must have been cut short, sacrificed so that he could make sense out of the world around him.

Probably quiet and withdrawn for most his childhood; his personality had emerged slowly as he gradually became more socialized, better equipped to handle his gift with maturity. Daniel thinks it a marvel of human resilience that Will can function at all. Will has struggled to retain who he is all his life.

Normal children emulate and copy the behaviors of their parents without understanding the behaviors. Children internalize behaviors, keeping the ones that garner positive associations and losing the ones that don't. Rewards and punishment, positive and negative reinforcement. This is how we all become socialized. But, Will internalized *all* of his influences, his mind unable to distinguish between the *right* emotions and the *wrong* emotions. Every scrap of emotion and behavior was noticed and recorded.

And his associations became more complex and nuanced as a result. Will's mind has no limits except the ones he places on himself. And this is what enables him to understand everyone and everything whether he wants to or not. This is why he builds forts and raises shields. Losing his mind is a legitimate fear. Daniel's gentle jokes aside, Will is crazy; a very special kind of crazy.

Will cannot only become other people; he can adapt his behavior to the expectations of the people around him. He can do it consciously as he had last night for the duet. Daniel recognizes Will had not wanted to open the French doors initially, but he had relented out of affection for Daniel. He had indulged Daniel in the outdoor rehearsals by adopting Daniel's persona to help him out of his comfort zone. Just like he had adopted the personas of other people at crime scenes, absorbing the screams and the violence with every breath. Just like he had created a version of himself for Hannibal.

If Will had not learned how to manage his gift, he would have absorbed everyone else's personality, would absorb them now, and would walk through life a montage of everyone he came in contact with. Will knows this and knows he cannot isolate himself completely. His experience with Hobbs and then Lecter proved that. Will was affected by Jack, too. And Alana. Will absorbed them all. Drowning in a tide of emotions that had finally found him gutted on Lecter's kitchen floor.

When Will had learned from Alana that Purnell had pulled the plug on their operation, and that Alana had not heard from Jack, Will had feared the worst. So had Alana. She had arrived before Will and foolishly gone inside Lecter's home by herself. Will had called Lecter to warn him in hopes Lecter would leave before Jack arrived for dinner, had suggested Jack would not be alone. But Lecter had already been aware of Will's deception and had recognized Will's call for what it was – a desperate attempt to save lives. Lecter would have realized Will's plan had blown up on him.

Will's version of events as he had told them to Daniel had left out some details. Daniel does not know if Will ever had a conversation with Jack after the fiasco with Mason Verger. He does not know if the two of them had agreed on using Jack as bait before Will had suggested to Lecter to reveal himself to Jack or if Will had come up with that on his own while discussing the *Iliad* over a tumbler of whiskey in Hannibal's office in front of the fireplace...

Had Will introduced the idea to send Jack a dinner invitation on his own? Or had Jack already agreed to it? Had Hannibal insinuated enough that Will had thought the suggestion his own? Daniel splashes his face with a few handfuls of cold water. The depths of manipulation and deceit are mind boggling. And Will had been in the thick of it for weeks. Another bundle of questions beckons in the back of Daniel's mind. A bundle that Daniel can reason through with a degree of certainty.

Had Jack and Will agreed on FBI back up? Had Will talked to Hannibal first, or to Jack? Had Will known Jack was going to have the cavalry standing by, or had Jack surprised Will by deciding that having just Will as backup had not be enough? Had Will prepared Hannibal for dinner knowing Jack would have snipers or had he talked to Hannibal before preparing Jack?

Daniel thinks Will had been surprised by Jack's announcement of snipers on the rooftops. Will had already looked deep within himself and found mercy. Will had not wanted Lecter dead, but he had wanted him to pay because Jack had wanted Hannibal to pay and Will had known that, had felt that. To Will's thinking, if he acted on his fantasies of killing Lecter, the act would send Will right over the edge and he would become what he feared, the monster who killed his creator. A modern day tale of Frankenstein in Will's mind, the ultimate act of playing God and inviting the ultimate punishment for the sin of hubris. An act of revenge from which there would have been no turning back.

Will might not have been able to live with himself. He had not wanted to kill Lecter, that much is clear, but his reasons are not. Had he called to spare Hannibal out of fear of what he might become, or out of love? Daniel thinks that Will does not know. He also thinks that Will's thinking is too complex to reduce his decision making to such a limited scope. Will had had far too many emotional entanglements to consider. Will could imagine why Jack had gone ahead alone. How had Will felt about that?

Only Will knows what he had been thinking the days leading up to the final bloodbath at Lecter's stately residence at 5 Chandal Square. What Will knew and when he knew it makes a difference to a point. Will had set both Lecter and Crawford up. Will had decided he didn't want to be Lecter's killer or Jack's killer and Daniel is certain Will had decided to take himself out of the equation. Until Alana's phone call, Will had had no intention of being anywhere near Chandal Square that night.

And when he had ended up going anyway, it must have seemed that Fate had punished him for not making his choice. Lecter had been the instrument of Fate that night, and in his own way, Lecter had granted Will the mercy of a choice. He had not taken Will's life. He had given Will another chance.

And Will struggles in his inferno trying to make his choice. Lecter has the twins. He intends to make sure Will makes a definitive choice this time.

Daniel looks in the mirror and finds the creases that furrow Will's brow have made an appearance on his. Will has to know what is lurking around the corners of tomorrow for him. He has been dancing on the edge of a knife. Perception is a tool pointed at both ends he has entrusted Daniel to help him wield the double pronged tool at Lecter and himself.

Will has to decide between Shelley and Homer. Between surrendering to God's judgement or joining Lecter in flipping him off. As Daniel stares at his reflection he wonders what he would choose.

Daniel thinks Jack Crawford wants Lecter so badly that he is willing to risk Will's mind, or what is left of it, to catch him. Daniel thinks Jack has some idea of how Will's mind works. He had certainly talked to Lecter at length about him. Jack continues to enlist Will because even though Will empathizes with Lecter, he empathizes with Jack, too. Jack knows all this and Will knows that he knows. Lecter knows, too.

He steps outside the bathroom to peer into the bedroom where Will still sits staring out the window from his seat at the edge of the bed. He has not moved and Daniel ducks back into the bathroom. Will's ability to analyze himself is impressive. Even now, as Will dreams he analyzes, compulsively collecting and assimilating associations. Whether drugged, regressed, or thrust into any state of consciousness or unconsciousness, his mind is a garden of images that blooms and grows vines around his head, a vast labyrinth of thoughts and memories, beautiful and terrible in scope and majesty.

His gift allows him to become other people totally cognizant of the shifting of personalities. Deliberate dissociation. Unique. An imagination so powerful that Will is not spared its relentless assault on his mind even in sleep. Also unique.

There is nothing on the planet so rarefied as Will. A connoisseur of the rare and beautiful, Lecter had found him irresistible and addictive. Will's particular madness is unmatched, and having tasted the delicacy; Lecter could not let him go.

To become a police detective and then a profiler for the FBI deliberately exposing himself to the absolute worst humanity had to offer; running the risk of internalizing the behaviors he adopted when he recreated the mindset of the criminals seems counter-intuitive. It only seems counter-intuitive if one assumes that Will did not enjoy it. But he did. Part of him enjoyed it tremendously. And Hannibal, ever curious, ever fascinated, the eternal student of human nature had known that he had enjoyed it, or would enjoy it if he allowed himself that particular pleasure. Hannibal is an intelligent psychopath. He is also a brilliant psychiatrist, because he is an intelligent psychopath. He extrapolated and deduced the truth from watching Will work his magic at crime scenes, from all their conversations, and had come to the conclusion that Will was taking a visceral enjoyment from his virtual crimes. And, he was being torn apart inside over the guilt he felt at enjoying it.

No wonder Will had told Jack it was getting harder and harder for him to look. His thinking was shutting down because of the encephalitis and he had known if his thinking shut down enough, the barriers and forts he kept in place would shut down, too. His mental defenses weakened by his illness, he had been ripe for Hannibal's design.

Exclusion by design. Hannibal had written the book on it, rather a published paper. Meeting Will must have blown his mind. Another Steppenwolf among the sheep. And love had bloomed.

There is a reason Will has never allowed psychiatrists to analyze him. He is afraid they would learn his dirty secret. Most people do not possess the specialized training to understand why people do what they do. Even if they did, most people would not take the time to try and figure out why a person does what they do. But Hannibal had. And once he had diagnosed the problem, Hannibal had taken it upon himself to help Will. He had helped initially out of curiosity and later, he had helped for a far more complicated and human reason. Love in the hands of Hannibal becomes not only a many splendored thing but a selfish thing.

Daniel would like for Will to become Hannibal, at least Will's version of Hannibal just for a little while. There are some questions he would like to ask him, rather questions he thinks Will would like to ask him but never would, even if he could. These would be questions that Will does not want to ask because to know the answers would require him to act. And he would rather simmer in his inferno than climb out of it on the back of the being he hates for sending him there. The barriers Will has put up have to come down.

Daniel knows Will has had plenty of conversations with the real Hannibal, but from adversarial positions, even in the bedroom. Will had been playing a role, and had remained in character most of the time. Remaining in character had meant giving Hannibal what he wanted; presenting Hannibal with what he had wanted to see. Daniel imagines Will tried to hold onto as much of his real self as he could, not wanting to give Hannibal the satisfaction or the edge. And now Daniel thinks he regrets the withholding, too.

Will has constructed a duplicitous and deceitful Hannibal in his mind. Will might not be able to endow his version of Hannibal with the honesty he had experienced with him in the solitude of Hannibal's salon. That would depend on Will's willingness to confront his true feelings. Daniel hopes the drugs are a strong enough substitute for that willingness.

Will has had plenty of imagined conversations with Hannibal. He's had indulgent fantasies where he killed him afterward. He has recovered fragments of conversation from drug soaked memories. He has had strange dreams in strange places and he has been talking to a serpent tailed eagle in his inferno most recently. Will has been the architect of all of his dreamscapes and like any architect; he knows well the blueprints of the structure and can avoid the places he doesn't want to go.

Daniel wants him to visit those places, and clean out the clutter from the basement, the attic, and all the other messy and well insulated places Will avoids in his own memory palace. Daniel can be a surrogate Hannibal for Will during the therapy. Daniel has already filled that role for Will in the bedroom. Getting Will to become Hannibal might not be possible. Will is drugged but his mind is quick and he has his habits. The drugs might have leveled the playing field, but these kinds of mind games are beyond Daniel. He thinks he may be in over his head.

Daniel thinks Will might have experienced similar feelings once he had entered the lion's den. Will must have known he was drowning. He couldn't let Hannibal know. And he chose not to tell Jack. Will had to have known Jack's mind. Will had not wanted to confirm Jack's doubts about him. If he had, the charges for Tier would have been enough to put him away.

He sets down the bag of ice and decides he can hold the ice to his face if he needs to when he joins Will in the bedroom. Daniel has allowed Will to free associate enough. He glances at the scissors and razor on the vanity and sighs. These are the main reason he stands in front of the mirror. He picks up the scissors and reminds himself this is for Will.

Will stares blinking at the shimmering wallpaper, the pink rosebuds entwined within a labyrinth of pale green leaves seem to pulse with a light of their own. He gradually becomes aware of someone…Daniel, sitting beside him on the bed. Daniel's sneakers skim along the floor, the creases and wrinkles in his tee and gym shorts wriggle in the light, shadows that shift and move darts of light over his body. He's fussing with something in his hands. Will glances down at his shorts, feels the boxers riding up his thighs as his bare feet dangle off the bed. He realizes his bicep is tied with a rubber band and he blinks in a panic as Daniel injects a long syringe into his forearm. He jerks his arm back, stops, unsure if he really wants to rip his skin open to escape whatever it is Daniel seems intent on pumping into his arm. Daniel looks up at him and Will grabs his wrist.

Stop…what is that?

Will, hey…what are you doing? Daniel reaches his other arm around to stop Will from tugging at his wrist. *Ouch! Will…let go.*

What are you shooting me up with?

What? No…oh, no, no…Will, I'm taking your taking your blood pressure, that's all. You were hyperventilating.

I see the needle, Daniel.

It's a stethoscope, here…feel the metal. See?

Will looks but he still sees a syringe sticking into his arm. He touches the syringe and it feels like what it looks like. *If it looks like a duck…* It takes all his strength of will to drop his hand and sit still. He can feel the point withdraw from his skin; can see the hole and pucker of flesh that will bruise later. Thoughts reel. He closes his eyes to shield them from the flashing strobe.

It's a syringe, Daniel. Will says flatly, opening his eyes to popping lights.

He watches Daniel look up from his watch. *No, it isn't. I want you to breathe in and out like you did before and count.*

Don't lie to me. Just tell me what you gave me. Is this…a hospital?

This is my home, Will…

This doesn't feel like… Will twists away from the grasp that holds his wrist.

Do you remember the exit word? Do you want to use it? I'll bring you out…

I'll bring you out…

I'll bring it out of you…

Will shakes his head. He doesn't want out. He doesn't want *it* out… He pulls his hands in, folds his arms across his chest. He needs the barrier so he can think.

He looks into Daniel's eyes and sees the wounded look. That chiding look he used to get from Jack…

I'm not your father, Will…

Will does not care. Every time he turns around someone is sticking a needle in him or fucking with his head. He is a magnet for abuse. He feels his face twitching from lips to forehead and he's not sure if he boils from anger or frustration. Probably both. He shoves himself backward so he huddles against the headboard draws his knees up and wraps his arms around them tightly.

He hears music…it's Bach. Brandenburg concertos…he tries to think which one as Daniel edges closer.

Will, I'm not lying to you. I just took your blood pressure. It's high again. You need to calm down and think… about what we're… doing here…together. You…

Are…

Not…alone.

Daniel's words sound far away though he sits right in front of him. Will does not answer. His head thuds with the music. It's the fifth concerto…

I want you to think about what you would have liked to happen in the kitchen that night…

Will focuses on the notes, hums the melody in his head. The hum of an electric saw fills his mind. Randall's left leg separates from its pelvic joints like butter as the fluttering of the flute mingles with the violins… Then the right leg, Will's movements are controlled and fluid. He stares at the detached leg on the metal table, and the blood splattered on the white apron he wears, the spare apron Hannibal pulled from the pantry on their way downstairs.

Can you hear me, Will? What could have happened instead? …other possibilities, can't you?

Stay with me, Will. The glint from the rails of the approaching train tempts you.

Tempts me like the ocean…

Follow your instincts. Where should you start?

The violins and flute help him focus as he sets down the saw and takes up the surgeon's knife. He looks down into the chest cavity, Randall's ribs have been removed already and all Will has to do is start taking out the organs. He sighs and feels the weight of Hannibal's hand on his shoulder as he begins to slice through the intestines the way Hannibal shows him to avoid getting bowel on the meat…

The wallpaper moves, shifts with the shadows.

You need to become intimate with your instincts, Will….

Will's eyes feel so heavy, so heavy and he wants to close them so badly because his head will not stop spinning but he forces himself to focus on the shifting melting face in front of him. He reaches out his hands to touch the smooth skin he knows so well and he smells sandalwood…and beach. The walls shimmer and the glint of sunlight refracted off the veneer of the old piano is blinding.

I don't know this place…

Will knows he is speaking but his lips aren't moving. He feels hands grasp his wrists, thumbs massaging slow circles on the inside as strong fingers glide along his bones up his arms and Will leans into the touch allowing the fingers to guide him forward. Light flickers relentlessly. *Make it stop…*

Close your eyes, Will.

I can feel myself fading…

You told me I was ocean mist to you, remember?

Yes…Where is this place?

The smell of ocean fills his nostrils salty fresh and moist and if he listens closely, he can hear it, too. His mind rolls with the distant crash of waves and he feels sand at his feet. Feels the spray of mist on his face. The wallpaper pulses and Will leans into the hand that cradles his head.

The memory is there, but your mind isn't making the connection. It will come. Don't force it.

Will is quiet. He cannot be sure if he saw this place in a dream or for real. Daniel does not live at the beach and yet the association is so strong. That he does not know with any certainty where he is bothers him; it bothers him a great deal. Will thinks knowing the difference between dream and reality is becoming harder and harder. No matter where he is, what mental state he is in, his senses process it all the same. He can't be sure of anything and he has travelled this road before, with Hannibal.

Listen, what do you hear?

Ocean waves, distant on the horizon of my mind. Breaking on a shore… my own feet unsure…

Your feet don't need to feel the sand. I'll be your anchor. Drift on the waves, Will. Are you drifting?

He is. His body feels weightless,buoyant as he listens to the rhythm of the waves wash upon the sand synchronous with the melodies of flute and violin. He looks up from Randall's ravaged chest cavity. His fingers find the smooth skin again and he draws the face close smelling surf and sandalwood. He pulls the face closer still until his lips can graze across nose and cheeks and Will feels nothing but the cool rush of water around him and the warm supple flesh that moves beneath his lips.

The way you looked at me that night in the barn with Ingram…you looked at me the same way after you killed Randall, when I asked you if you had fantasized about killing me.

Hannibal words fall from lips brushing through his hair. Will has missed this, missed it so much… But how can he forgive the monstrous acts of the monster he chases?

You awoke and gazed at me with that same look after our first night together after Tier…

Will remembers and tries to turn aside but strong hands scented with musk and sandalwood hold him still. The fragrance tingles and lingers and Will wants to lick at the fingers that caress his lips.

And you smiled the same way each time… Will says.

Thoughts of killing me fueled your becoming. Most of what we do, most of what we believe, is motivated by death.

I've never felt as alive as I did when I was killing him. As I felt when I thought I was killing you. You knew…

I hoped. Out of destruction comes creation. Your becoming Will. I could not be more pleased knowing that thoughts of killing me inspired your becoming.

I haven't become…not yet.

The monster grows inside you, Will. You would deny yourself the urges you kept down for so long? You would deny…the grunts and poetry of a life we could have shared? You are alone because you are unique.

I'm as alone as you are. But I know who I am.

And you know who I am. You wanted an admission from me. To admit what I am. I did. For you. No one can be fully aware of another unless we love them.

You loved an ideal.

Will struggles against the hands at his face but the hands will not release him. He thinks they remain because he wants them there…

Do you think me the only one of us to allow the potential nestled inside expression? By expressing that love, did you not see my potential? Or did you see only the monster growing inside yourself?

What was growing inside you…except pride in your accomplishments?

Didn't you think you could change me? The way I changed you?

The wallpaper peels away from the beams in the wall, burning and through the flames Will can see the inferno waiting. The figure shifts beside him and he hears the rustling of feathers as the dark creature shifts on the bed of stone.

You remember everything we've ever said. Listen…what do you hear?

Hannibal…

What do you hear, Will?

A melody…

Orchestrations of carbon… All our destinies swimming in blood and emptiness.

I feel empty, drained, used up…faded.

He feels the weight of the wings at his back, he relaxes his shoulders to allow them to settle on the rock, not daring to look at himself for fear of what he might see.

You didn't wade into the stream, Will. You came here.

He feels fingers kneading the back of his neck then skull and he lets the hand guide him close so his nose nuzzles against Hannibal's ear. The creature's ear buried beneath the silky down that slips along his cheek.

No, I don't want to be here. Will whispers softly into smoke and sandalwood scented feathers as the ocean fades away.

With every choice lies the possibility of regret. You welcomed my embrace that night in my kitchen. When you saw Abigail, did you understand then?

You were supposed to leave…

We couldn't leave without you…

You took her from me, again.

Your actions…

My actions did not kill her, you did. And who are you to sit in judgement of me? To judge me guilty and render punishment?

And why not? The offense was against me. Who else is qualified to judge you?

You found me guilty…

Of deceiving me. As you have found yourself guilty.

One deception to halt the parade of lies from you…

There were no lies between us, except yours. You lie to me and to yourself. Do you remember what an imago is?

Yes...

What images of me do you carry?

I carry an ideal of you. A concept of an ideal. Neither of us is ideal.

And neither are concepts immutable. They can be expanded, like boundaries. If you are capable of transformation so then am I. We are just alike.

Boundaries and limits. If we learn our limitations too soon…

We never learn our power… You would have taken my freedom from me Will. If not my life; then surely that.

You were supposed to leave… If you had left, none of this would have happened. When did you know?

Still torturing yourself? And had I not learned of your deception, what consequences then? What do you see, Will?

What would I have liked to happen? What should have happened?

If you prefer. Imagine taking my freedom, Will.

I can't… Don't ask me to do that.

You have to face your fear. You wanted a reckoning…

The strong hands cradle his face, stroke his head and talons trail through his hair, scraping sharply along his scalp. Will's lips slide across seeking the warm skin to rest aside a cheek he knows so well. Instead, feathers rustle and Will opens his eyes to see the black faced creature seated across from him on the cracked boulder, a smoky orange sky at his back. The talons move to scrape across his shoulders as the creature turns him around.

The circular drive in front of the Baltimore Hospital for the Criminally Insane glistens in the rain, the sidewalk drenched in sparkling wetness that shines beneath Will's shoes as he walks up the steps. He stands in the lobby sniffing at the air. The odor is medicinal; a scent of mildew seasoned with a touch of bleach, the aftertaste of a bitter meal, still sitting acrid upon Will's tongue. The sight of Frederick Chilton causes the sour bile to curdle.

Mr. Graham. I can call you Will, can't I? No need to be so formal is there?

None at all, Frederick.

Will tries not to stare at Chilton's damaged face. It's still shocking. He pushes images of Miriam's bullet splintering through cheekbone from his mind.

You can imagine my surprise when I received a phone call from Jack Crawford threatening me. I wasn't aware you had any friends left.

Jack threatened you? That doesn't sound like Jack.

Chilton raises a brow, not sure if Will is being sarcastic. Will wonders if Chilton is really that dense or if he fakes it.

Not in so many words but tone of voice. Seems like I'm still everybody's favorite punching bag.

Will is quiet. He doubts his silence will invite Chilton to do the same. Whining is Chilton's way of keeping the conversation focused on his favorite topic. Himself. Will just wants to get this over with.

Where is he?

I gave him your old cell. Seemed appropriate. He's not as cooperative as you were.

I don't remember being all that cooperative.

You were the ideal patient by comparison.

Therapy not going well?

Charming as always. Shall we?

Will follows Chilton through the halls to the elevator he knows will take them down below to the secured levels where the mezzanine and reinforced cells are located. The series of locked doors and stairwells is new. Probably to accommodate Chilton's newest addition. They walk down the steps to the mezzanine filled with cages. The cages are empty.

Wait here. I don't dare put him in a cage for your visit. You understand.

No, I don't.

Transporting him to and from his cell is too risky. He manages to induce enough chaos right where he is.

The knot in Will's stomach hardens as he thinks of the array of possible treatments and tests Hannibal must have endured over the past year. A part of him hopes each one was every bit as tasty as the therapy Hannibal had served up to him. He tells himself Hannibal is far too proud, too strong minded, too conceited to give Chilton the satisfaction of breaking him. Will thinks there is nothing in Chilton's arsenal that Hannibal could not chew up and spit out. Hannibal must be entertaining himself at Chilton's expense.

Will watches Chilton leave to secure the hallway that leads to the row of dank and musty cells. Will can almost feel the stone walls damp with moisture beneath his fingers and can picture the rat turds on the cold cement floor under the bed and clinging to the bottom of the toilet and the cracked and rusted sink.

He has condemned Hannibal to this place. A place he himself had despised. Will had gone fishing in his mind to escape the confines of his cell. Hannibal escapes to a mindscape more vast and exotic than a stream. Or would, if Chilton would leave him be. Apparently, Chilton cannot resist playing with the new toy the FBI brought him. The added security suggests Hannibal continues to resist his accommodations.

Will paces; unable to stand still as he gazes at the reinforced steel cages. If he stands still too long, he may find himself back inside one of them. He halts in his pacing and looks up at the sound of footsteps.

Did you tell him I was coming?

No.

Why wouldn't you tell him I was coming?

Chilton raises his eyebrows as a pucker of amusement lifts one side of his partially paralyzed mouth. Will thinks he shouldn't stare but then decides to dispense with the pretext of politeness. It's just Frederick.

I didn't tell him because I didn't want to give him time to prepare. I so rarely can surprise him.

Why would you want to surprise him?

He does not believe I will deliver on our little quid pro quos. I'd like to benefit from your visit.

I wonder why he doesn't believe you, Frederick. What am I being used to bargain for?

An incentive for good behavior. He has to stop biting the staff. It's getting near impossible to hire quality personnel. Punishment doesn't work, so I thought I would try rewards.

What rewards? You didn't instantly think of me.

Of course not. A warm shower. Prepared meals. His charcoal pencils and drawing pads. And the like…small comforts, but quite grandiose by normal standards. And all documented.

You offered things he had already given up. Return to him things you had taken away. Not much of an inducement.

Apparently not. But you...

He threw a tantrum, Frederick. And you promise him candy if he'd calm down? That's bad parenting at the very least, and reprehensible in your profession.

Appeasement, quid pro quo…whatever works at this point.

Why not just allow me to visit after the first request?

Timing. Had to see how far he would take it. It is regrettable that there have been casualties along the way, but he's such a prize… magnificent to watch in his natural state.

I've already seen it.

Hmmm. I'll bet you're something to watch in action. Chilton huffs, *As for the candy, I'll let him unwrap you slowly and see what happens.*

I'm trying to get better. What's in it for you, Frederick? You wouldn't have agreed unless you hoped to gain something for yourself. You want something from him.

His cooperation of course. He lacks motivation. He needs…an audience, applause. He won't talk to me. Highly resistant to treatment. He's as stubborn as you were, more so. At least you didn't punctuate your indifference with violence. Ah, here we are.

Chilton turns to Will before signaling to open the door. He holds up a hand up to the orderly operating the doors and latches. Although he can't see them, Will feels feathers slide along his cheek and shudders at the touch.

Now that you are here I intend to make the most of it. To watch the two of you circle each other will be fascinating I'm sure. You can't resist each other. He's here for study. I can't study him if he won't cooperate. Let's see if you calm the savage beast, or if you excite him more.

I'm here for me, Frederick, not you.

I don't think you really know what you are here for. Let's let Hannibal unwrap his pretty present and then perhaps I can convince the almighty FBI that that you belong in a cell right next to him. Two for the price of one.

If Kade Purnell had her druthers, I'd be in here already.

If your therapy doesn't work out you just might.

Don't start turning down the sheets and leaving chocolates just yet, Frederick. I don't think I'll be back for any therapy with you.

We'll see. For now your therapy is not with me; it's with him. Your psychiatrist didn't refer you to me. He referred you to Hannibal. That says something don't you think?

About you or my therapist?

Chilton rubs at the mustache and goatee that are supposed to hide his disfigurement. They don't.

How is he?

You don't know what he's become?

What would that be?

He's a caged animal, quite primal.

If he is, it's because you've reduced him to that.

It's what he is. Only his habitat has changed. And it took less than a year to manifest.

Will thinks there still isn't a word to describe the happy anticipation of feeling contempt. But he feels the contempt well enough.

The electronic door clicks and Will stands with Chilton in the hallway that stretches in front of them. Chilton does not remain at the door. He begins to walk and the door locks behind him. Will bites his lip. Chilton does not intend to even offer the illusion of privacy.

Will knows Hannibal can hear the scrape of two pair of shoes along the floor. By the time Will has reached the half way mark, he is sure Hannibal has already smelled him. Chilton is about to be very disappointed if he expected to get a rise out of Hannibal. Will turns his head to the sound of rustling feathers. The corridor is empty.

Hello, Will.

Hannibal's familiar voice floats through the bars before Will has even stepped into his line of vision.

Hello…Doctor Lecter.

Will allows his eyes to soften as he steps in front of Hannibal's cell to gaze through the bars at the rigid figure dressed in gray jumpsuit on the other side. Will doesn't want to give Chilton the satisfaction of glimpsing any expressions of intimacy between them. They both know Frederick would be salivating for it. More ammunition to hurl at Hannibal later. Will feels his chest lurch at the sight of Hannibal standing tall, chin up but the predatory gleam Hannibal reserves for Chilton dissolves as his eyes alight on Will.

Will stands quiet and unmoving as Hannibal's eyes wander over him fully aware of the smirk on Chilton's face. Will notices the subtle changes incarceration has wrought. There was always an air of superiority about Hannibal, an aristocratic sort of aloofness that Will had found alternately amusing and annoying. The air of aristocracy remains but there is dangerousness to him. The danger was always there, but Hannibal had not advertised it as he was doing now. He has lost weight. He seems smaller somehow, wiry and edgy. Will acknowledges that standing in a cell does tend to diminish one's stature and increase one's pallor. Hannibal's face is like stone, the chiseled cheekbones are hollow and his skin is so pale as to be almost blanched. The contrast of his face against the dark wall at his back is stark. He is a ghost of who he was.

His hair is longer, it falls over one eye briefly until Hannibal flicks it away and Will can think of plenty of reasons he has not had a shave in a while. The number of fingers would be ten; there are two hundred and six bones in the human body for starters. The floor is wet and water pools in dips along the floor. Will observes the condition of the cell and deduces that Hannibal had received hosing down earlier. The walls are bare as is the mattress on the floor. The bed frame has been removed in case Hannibal would take it apart. With his bare hands.

Hannibal stands in profile only his head is turned toward Will. The eyes that gaze into Will's are dulled with the monotony, but emotions stir ominously behind the black glass.

I've missed you, Will. You never write.

Will smiles at this. It seems the perfect thing for Hannibal to say.

Considering where I'd be sending my letters, I thought better of it.

I suppose my memories will have to do. We do share many memories, don't we?

Hannibal's eyes linger a little too long below Will''s hips and Will figures he knows why Chilton didn't set out any chairs. Besides giving Hannibal notice that he was going to have visitors Chilton can easily observe Will's every movement and Hannibal's from where he stands. Will shifts his weight but his trousers tighten anyway. Hannibal lifts his eyes to Will's face once again and the slight tug at his lips and the knowing tics in the corners of his eyes cause Will to feel heat across his cheeks and down his throat.

Will hears Chilton's feet move along the floor. This is just the sort of innuendo he craves and Hannibal is handing it to him right out of the gate. Will sighs. Hannibal must have his entertainments.

You look well. The jacket is very stylish, looks good on you. And your hair, freshly cut?

Yesterday.

The dogs are well? Still seven?

Still seven.

You look…very much the same. How long has it been?

Not so long that I would appear any different.

No one in this room is the same, Will.

We've all changed haven't we? But that is the nature of life. Nothing stays the same.

Some of us change more radically than others. Some of us do not change much at all. Despite exposure to a number of potentially edifying experiences.

Hannibal turns his head slightly in Chilton's direction and is rewarded with a click of the tongue and an exasperated sigh.

Change is not always a good thing. Tell him what you've done, Hannibal.

I've no interest in meeting your expectations, Frederick. Tell him yourself.

You see the condition of his cell? It didn't start out this way. I honestly don't know what Doctor Clayton expects you to gain from this experience. Except perhaps…closure.

Frederick says you've been biting the staff?

Hannibal's eyes shift to Chilton and narrow slightly. *I was provoked.*

Nothing of the kind happened. You ripped her face off with your teeth. It would have been merciful if you had killed her.

Hannibal's expression does not change. *Mercy has no place at the table. Mercy would have been served had you allowed me to finish.*

What happened to impulses can be controlled with restraint and conquered with obedience?

Will knows the sound of his voice will bring Hannibal's attentions back to him and away from Chilton's scowl. Hannibal is obeying the call of his impulses; not his reason. He's ignoring his own advice, advice he had drilled into Will. Will chews on his lip as he remembers the literal restraints Hannibal had used to illustrate the abstract and make the instruction more tactile for Will.

One must be sufficiently motivated. My present circumstance is not conducive to motivation. In those instances, one can easily slip into a state of nature.

This isn't you. This is giving in. Why give in to such self-destructive urges?

Disappointed I'm not living up to your ideal of me? How does that feel?

You tell me. I'm learning to manage my expectations.

As am I. Absent valid or attainable rewards for delaying the satisfaction from indulging one's nature or resisting it altogether; one can devolve into a state that at the very least appeases one's natural inclinations. I have no reason to deny my urges here. I seek to fulfill the ones I can. And I mourn the loss of those I cannot.

Hannibal again looks Will up and down and Will flushes warm under his penetrating gaze. He may as well be standing here naked. Chilton remains a goading insufferable presence at his side. Will takes a step forward. Just one step.

The exclusion is no longer voluntary, then. It is imposed. And because the imposition is eating at you, you bite back? The exclusion of the society that excludes you?

Something like that. Frederick here is the most sought after item on my menu.

Chilton tries to frown, but manages to curl his upper lip in something like disgust. Will winces, not so much that Hannibal means what he says, but that he said it aloud.

You can appreciate my boredom, can't you Will?

You said if you were ever caught, you had your memory palace.

And all its rooms are filled with you.

Hannibal curls his fingers around the bars to stand as close as he can to Will. Will stares at the fingernails, still remarkably free of grime even here. Hannibal's face looms between the bars at Will. Invisible feathers flutter at Will's back and he tosses his head backward just to make sure there are no wings sticking out of his jacket.

You've given him reason enough to give you a lobotomy. Is that what you want? Will says.

Frederick would never do that. There'd be nothing left to poke, would there, Frederick? I'm not valuable if you take me apart. Besides, I have to be ready to stand trial.

You have to stop dining on the staff. Chilton says. *You at least used to cook the meat before eating it.*

Are you offering the use of the kitchen? I would think it hardly suitable.

Maybe he should think about using his own paper as part of his defense strategy. That would be a novel approach. Chilton says.

I don't see how that would help. Will says, knowing that is not what Chilton meant. *Still no trial date?*

Will says looking at his feet as the floor shifts, tiny cracks splintering along the stained cement.

I have been unable to find adequate representation. Will you be testifying against me?

My testimony would hardly benefit the prosecution.

And the defense?

I doubt the defense would know what to do with me either. I'm thinking of pleading the fifth. I'm bleeding with contempt.

A thin smile from Hannibal and an impatient eye roll from Chilton. Will sighs as he looks at Hannibal through the bars.

No one will take the case? Or you don't want a public defender? Will asks.

Too many applicants for the job. Reading through all their resumes can be tiresome. The desire to share in the celebrity is painfully transparent. And then Frederick doesn't help. He tells them all sorts of gruesome stories when they come to interview me. Don't you, Frederick?

Maybe you should stop…dining on the staff, then. Will says, biting his tongue.

Care to join me at the table?

That's not why I came.

Why did you come?

I still have to deal with you and my feelings about you.

Well, Frederick is most possessive of me. He taunts me with promises but he wouldn't have invited you here. Someone must have twisted his arm. Jack?

Yes.

What does he want?

I don't know what Jack wants. It's more about what I want. Rather what I need. I can't remember shooting you. My therapist believes that talking to you will help me remember.

Your therapist sent you here. And Frederick refused. You contacted Jack. Jack strong armed Frederick. What is your therapist like?

He's young. About my age. New to the area.

Interesting that he would send you to me. Trauma often results in memory loss. You may never recall those memories. He should have told you that.

I told him that. Chilton says.

Will turns to stare at Chilton as does Hannibal. Chilton makes a helpless gesture with his hands. He takes a step backward and looks aside for moment before resuming his vigil.

He did. You were there with me. You remember.

With noise and clarity.

Well, I don't.

Remembering or not doesn't change what happened. Why does he think you need to remember?

I think I need to remember. I've been told what happened, but that's not the same thing. As you well know.

You can't recreate it in your imagination?

Recreating the scene hasn't given me my own motive for…

It's not real to you. But, here I stand. Is it that you didn't pull the trigger effectively this time?

It's that I pulled the trigger at all. I remember something different that night. Why would I pick up the gun? What were my intentions?

You have tried to kill me, Will. More than once.

Yes. But, I evolved beyond that.

Hannibal smiles and the feathers flutter at his back, the scrape of a talon along his throat sends another shudder along Will's spine.

What do you see as you look at me now, in this place?

I see regret.

Mine or yours?

I think there's enough for both of us.

You wanted a reckoning. Here it stands. I have lost everything. I have lost you. What do you think?

What happened to you, to us, had to happen. It wasn't…sustainable.

That you are standing here now would seem to refute that assertion.

Hannibal…I remember everything else about that night. Why can't I remember that? Please…help me remember.

Appealing to my better nature? I thought I didn't have one.

I was hoping…

You think remembering will help you do what? Move on? Accept what has changed and what…has been lost? Do you still grieve, Will?

Do you?

The friendship we had is over.

You keep saying that and yet, here we are.

Yes, here we are.

You were supposed to leave

I couldn't leave without you.

You let me shoot you?

I let you follow your instincts. Perhaps you couldn't leave without me?

Will! Chilton's voice cries out in warning from behind Will.

Don't allow your empathy to confuse what you want with what he wants. You're too close to the bars…Will! Damn it. Open the Door! They'll blame me for this, too. Will….

Will realizes he has edged right up to the bars. Hannibal need only slip his hands through to grab his shirt or his hair. Hannibal grabs at his hair. Of course.

We are alone without each other. I would have you with me, to share in what we created together.

Will hears the gasp from Chilton as Hannibal pulls him close so that his lips graze Will's cheek. Will freezes, unsure of what Hannibal might do to him. Despite the fear he feels envelop him like a tight fitting glove he does not move away.

Like a moth to the flame. I am mad.

You need not fear me, Will. I have no desire to hurt you. But, you shouldn't have come…

Hannibal whispers as his fingers hold curls so tightly that Will knows if he tries to wretch away he will lose hair and scalp in a painful ripping of flesh. He doesn't have long to ponder his situation. He feels the shocks of electricity vibrate through Hannibal's body as the Taser presses against his side. Hannibal's fingers tremble and spring open releasing him. The Taser finds Will next.

What? Why?

Will looks up at Chilton as he sinks to the floor. Chilton hands the Taser back to the guard.

I'm afraid your contact with Doctor Lecter has caused you to attack me. Welcome home, Mister Graham.

Will's ribs still sting with sensation as he sits upon a thin mattress on a familiar bed frame facing another chipped sink every cracked detail apparent in the glaring overhead light. He looks down at the gray colored molded tray containing the food just as gray he is supposed to eat. Conversations with Chilton resurface in his memory to mingle with the one he just had.

Your personality disorders, neuroses-- all forgeries.

Even if that were true, I'd still be a psychopath - of some interest.

Mm. Quite a manipulative one at that.

You will be the first and last word in the mind of Will Graham. God, you could dine out on that for years.

And the first and last word on Hannibal. I'm looking at a very comfortable retirement. Well, bon appetite. To both of you…

Will hears the strains of Handel's *Musica sull'acqua*. He thinks the sound is coming from speakers at first until he sees the talons curl around the edges of his cell. His inferno follows him still. Will sets his tray aside and gets up from his bed.

What just happened?

Will stands at the bars and watches the creature draw itself up to stand before him on the other side. It cocks its head to one side and the black feathers ripple across its face. Lips begin to move from where its beak should be, but isn't. Will's monster is looking more human all the time.

You were testing the boundaries of your fears. You are still tripping. Do you remember the exit word?

Yes…I'm ok.

The thing in his stomach turns sharply and Will winces. He looks over the shoulder of the creature as the damp and musty wall across the corridor is swallowed in flames. The desolate vista of his inferno begins to manifest in the smoke that filters into his cell.

Do you see, Will?

See what?

See the way out of your inferno. You still see good and evil. You believe you belong in that cell. At least you fear you belong in that cell.

Good and evil exist. Right and wrong. Up and down.

Relative to your location. Situational. Negotiable.

Opposites then. Balance. Nature demands balance.

Creation and destruction are balance? Evolution. One species makes way for another. Dominance is not balance.

What is it?

The state of being that emerges above the chaos. Opposites are but adjectives to describe what is and what is not. Good and evil are not opposites, neither are they mutually exclusive. They are concepts.

Concepts of Ideals. I have a concept of good. I have a concept of evil. Just as I have a concept of you.

An imago you cherish and the reality that never fails to fall short.

Love the ideal but accept the flesh?

Acceptance leads to forgiveness. Have you forgiven me, Will?

Is that what you want from me?

I forgave you.

Did you? Doesn't feel like it.

The creature begins to walk away from Will and Will watches the smoke swirl in its wake, its scaly tail twitching behind it. Will looks at the bars separating them, takes a breath and walks through. He leaves Baltimore State Hospital behind to gaze once more at the debris filled terraces that litter the hillside of the ruined terrain. His mouth is dry with the acrid taste of it almost immediately. The air is thick and metallic, almost corrosive if Will breathes too deeply.

The wolf and winged Daniel are perched upon the large boulder where he last saw them. Daniel's one wing droops and Daniel's eyes follow Will's gaze to it. He wriggles it slightly and turns to face Will, and Will thinks the green eyes that stare into his convey such sadness. Will is struck again at how beautiful he looks upon his rock and how out of place that beauty is in this devastated place that seeks to devour his very soul.

Will, the devil is not as black as he is painted. Daniel says.

The wolf jumps off the rock to greet Will. It stands at his side and nudges his leg. Will looks down to see he is wearing dark blue trousers, a shirt and pullover sweater. He hears music…a harpsichord. Will closes his eyes and the music becomes more audible, the notes resonate and pulse in his memory.

It's after dinner; Will holds a tumbler of whiskey warm and fragrant in his hands as he watches Hannibal play. His fingers strike the keys with confidence as Will turns the page of the score that sits before him.

What is this?

This is Scarlatti, Sonata in D minor. Do you like it?

I think my ear prefers the pieces in major chords, but it's…nice. Will says looking out the window at the late afternoon traffic. He glances back at Hannibal and feels the contentment this room always brings. He slips it on and wraps himself in it and he feels safe.

Hannibal stops playing and straightens the score Will had left hanging to one side.

What's bothering you? Hannibal says, closing the lid. Hannibal pats the bench next to him.

Will rolls his eyes and looks into his glass.

I…had a strange dream. I'm not sure if I want to talk to you about it, though.

Does the dream concern me?

Will nods from the window and takes a gulp of the sublimely smooth whiskey shimmering dark amber in the glass he holds tightly in his hands.

Then what do you think? Come. Sit. Please.

Will takes a breath and slides in beside Hannibal. He hesitates. He is enjoying the moment so much he doesn't want to let it go just yet. He feels the touch of Hannibal's knuckles slide across his jaw, a gentle prompt.

Where was my gun when I turned to face you in the kitchen?

Hannibal blinks and almost frowns but he runs his fingers through Will's hair as he thinks a moment.

In your right hand, at your side. You slowly dropped it as you spoke.

Did I let it slip to the floor before or after you cut me?

Before. I held out my hand and you welcomed my embrace. At least for a second or two. Why?

I don't remember picking it up again.

You didn't. Shock. Pain. A lot of it. For both of us.

Mostly me, I think.

Will turns his head slightly so Hannibal's face is squarely in front of him.He lifts his chin waiting for Hannibal to challenge him on that one. Hannibal raises a brow and shrugs.

There are different kinds of pain, but we shall leave that discussion for another time, perhaps. Why the concern about your gun?

Aren't you going to ask which gun it was?

It was the Berretta. Why the concern?

I didn't use it.

Is that a question?

This dream I had. I did. And the dream seemed like it could have happened. But I'm not sure if what I dream are dreams or memories…or…

If what you see and feel is real at any given moment. You are afraid you can't tell the difference between being asleep and awake?

I'm beginning to…be afraid.

And in this dream you shot me…after I cut you? Well, I can assure you that did not happen. I walked out the front door. How does that make you feel, to shoot me?

Well, in the dream, it's after the fact. I didn't kill you. I come to visit you, at Chez Chilton. And I ask you about it because I don't remember.

Why do you think you missed?

I'm not sure what my intentions were. Maybe I hadn't aimed to kill. Maybe my hand slipped from all the blood. Hell of a thing to ask.

But important. Dreams prepare us for waking life. What are you preparing for?

Will is quiet. He doesn't want to tell this Hannibal about hunting for him in Florence.

Yes you do. Yes you do. That's exactly what you should be talking about but never do…

You dropped your gun, Will. Were you anticipating regret? You welcomed my embrace and you did not struggle against the blade. Do you regret your actions in the kitchen?

I regret not anticipating your actions.

So you wouldn't have taken my life. No more fantasies of killing me?

The ache in Will's chest pricks sharp and he winces at Hannibal's words. He lets his head rest on Hannibal's shoulder. Feels arms encircle him. He shakes his head into Hannibal's shoulder.

Are you anticipating regret now, Will? Are you preparing for something with the potential for regret?

The ache grows sharper still and Will lets his head drop to rest against Hannibal's chest. Will feels his chest tighten and he knows tears are about spill. He holds his breath willing that the sting of moisture in his eyes recedes, but it does not. He thinks of the Hannibal in the cell, miserable and filled with spite. So spiteful he colluded with Chilton to keep him there with him.

That is the Hannibal he knows and hates. The one capable of fostering the co-dependency Will allowed in order to keep his seat at their grand chess board of deceit and manipulation. The one who killed Abigail to punish him. The one who had committed unspeakable atrocities as the Ripper.

And there is this Hannibal. The one Will knows from the salon. The one who cradles his head in his arms at this moment.

Do you still intend to take my freedom from me, Will? Put me in a cage?

Will pushes his face deeper into Hannibal's shirt, smells the cologne, the musk, the sandalwood rushing heady and strong and filling him up. He feels fingers in his hair, rifling through the curls to settle warm upon his head. He wants this. He wants. He wants what he cannot have.

Ah, you are faced with the decision once again. You are trying to choose.

I hated you; hate you still for so many things. Will says into Hannibal's sweater.

I know.

The Hannibal I visited was a ghost of you.

Do you still believe you changed me as I changed you?

Will sits up, shakes his head and lets the tears run off. He wipes a hand across his face, catches the moisture impatiently flicking it away. He looks into Hannibal's face.

I know I did.

And you thought a cage would not? Prick us do we not bleed?

Thoughts of Hannibal behind Chilton's bars fill his mind. Chilton would prick Hannibal until he bled so Chilton could reap the recognition and the rewards. Will figures Chilton would pass off Hannibal's observations and work as his own, further pricking his prize patient. But Hannibal has pricked Will, too.

You have taken things from me and I have…hated you for it. You gutted me with a knife so sharp it felt like ice going through me. And I hate you for that, too.

You think your betrayal did not wound?

I know it did.

What have I taken from you that you were not willing to give, Will?

Like Achilles gave his armor to Patroclus, let him go into battle alone? He lost Patroclus to Hector over his pride.

Hubris, Will. At the heart of every Greek tragedy.

And your heart as well?

The painting of Leda and the Swan in dining room. Why do you think I hang it there?

The association of sex with food. An expression of carnality to accompany the eating of human flesh, literally and figuratively at your table. A massive joke on your dinner guests. The ones being served and the ones…being served.

A joke you shared many times. But knowing me as well as you do, you know there is another more subtle and perhaps significant association I make . Do you know the myth of Leda and the swan?

I do. The Swan is Zeus and Leda was a mortal he pursued and raped.

And if I told you that there is an analogy to be drawn between Zeus and Leda and you and I, what would you think?

I would think that I am not the swan.

Will reaches for his tumbler and takes a gulp, licks his lips as he gazes at Hannibal. He feels the warmth of the whiskey slide down his throat and he observes Hannibal's eyes drift there as he swallows. He smiles slowly. Hannibal lifts his eyes and his lips peel back slightly so Will can see his teeth.

No, you're not. But, not because of the sexual associations. Well, not entirely. Think on that while I show you something else.

Hannibal walks across the room to the far wall where there hangs a cluster of pictures Will has seen many times. They all contain scenes of anguish or death, a theme that runs strong in Hannibal's art selections.

What do you see?

I see…Judas betraying Christ.

Will gives Hannibal a hard look to which Hannibal cracks an almost imperceptible smile. Will looks back to the prints.

I see um…is this Cain and Abel?

It is. The others are less recognizable. This would be Antenor, the betrayer of Troy. And this one is the death of the sons of Simon Maccabaeus. What does the arrangement suggest to you?

Will looks intently at the prints housed in the handsome antique wood frames. The one of Christ and Judas is a Caravaggio, one of Hannibal's favorite artists, but the rest are from other centuries. He thinks of the stories and what they have in common. Hannibal has arranged them in a circle.

You left out the painting in the middle. What is that? Allegorical I suppose? The men in armor and the classical nude woman in the middle is an allusion to…something epic I'm sure.

The one in the middle is by William Hogarth. It is entitled, Satan, Death, and Sin. *Do you recognize what it is from?*

Not at the moment, but I will.

I have great confidence in you Will. I always have. Have you finished your drink?

Uh, yes.

Another?

Any more pictures you'd like to show me?

I always have more, but none I need to show you at the moment.

Then I don't want another drink. Will grins at Hannibal from beneath his brows, eyes looking upward at him in the way Will knows he adores, but won't admit.

Will feels so hot at the moment he can hardly stand it. Hannibal stands beside him emanating the same heat from beneath the sweater that hangs off one shoulder a little because Will had stretched it out one evening helping Hannibal out of it, too quickly for Hannibal, but not quickly enough for Will. Will lowers his eyes as he nuzzles his head against Hannibal's shoulder. Waits for the hitch of breath he knows will come.

It does. Hannibal nudges him back. Will stands leaning against Hannibal, inhaling the smell of him, imagining every contour of the body he knows languishes beneath the soft cashmere and twill. He imagines Hannibal's mouth around his cock and his teeth, pricking him sharply, painfully, and exquisitely along his thighs and between his legs.

Will licks his lips imagining wrapping them around Hannibal's swollen cock, wet and warm, that luscious ripple that comes from the sucking and he feels a warm hand slide along his stomach, lift his shirt and ease its way down his boxers.

Will's turn to catch his breath. *Hannibal.*

Upstairs? Hannibal nods at the Greek amphora that sits atop the bookcase.

Another match?

Why not?

Will follows Hannibal out of the salon, through the kitchen, and up the back stairs turning off the lights as they go. Will can feel his heart beating in his chest as he climbs the stairs and imagines he feels Hannibal's thumping in time with his.

You are alone because you are unique.

I'm as alone as you are.

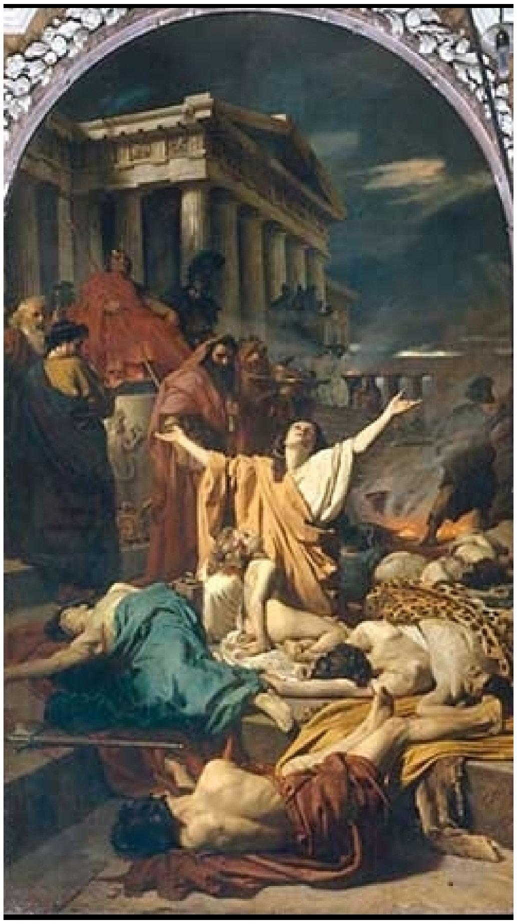
You're not alone, Will. I'm standing right beside you.

Will knows his association - his relationship with Hannibal has brought forth an indescribable evil within him. Will accepts that he invited it. He invited it the moment he started working for the FBI. Hannibal has followed his nature. He forced Will to acknowledge his. Evil begets evil. Good begets good. Will thinks that if he continues to see his universe like that, he will never get out of his inferno.

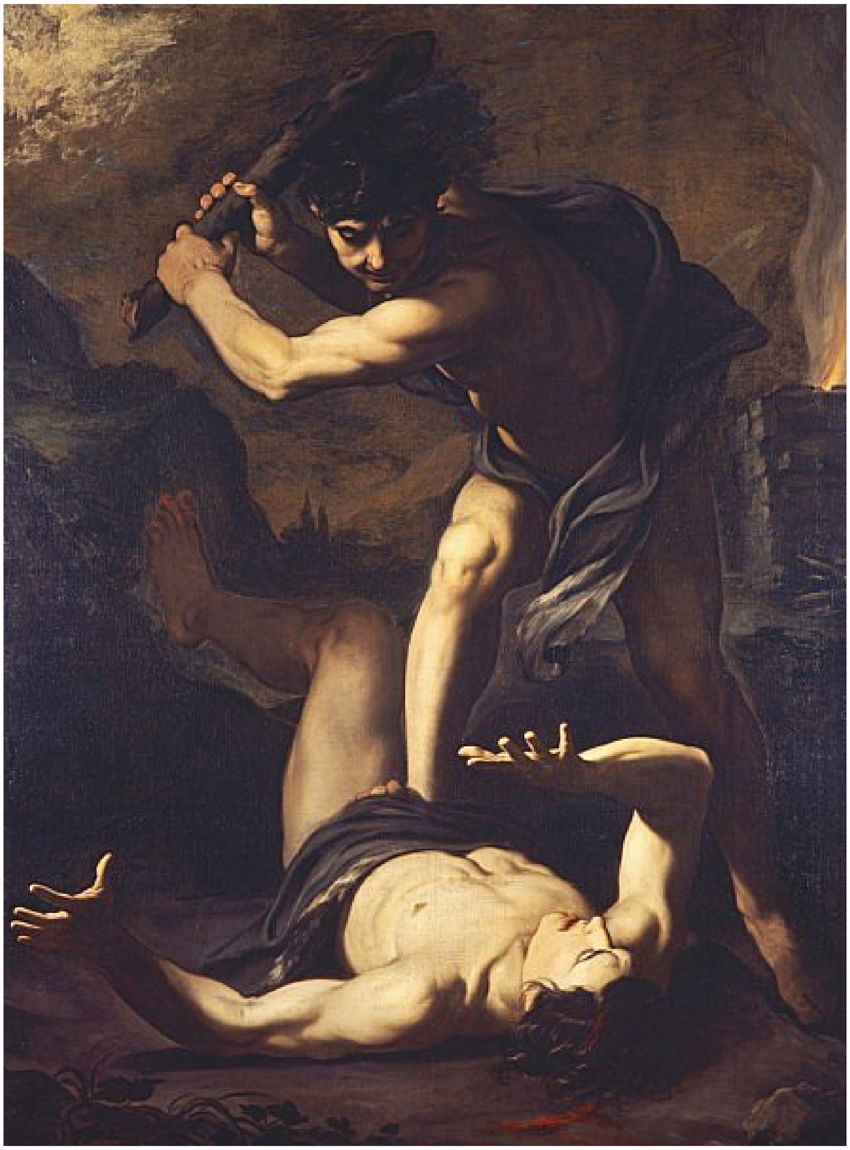
He glances at Hannibal on the other side of the bed, their bed, as he pulls off his sweater, folds the sleeves and folds the sweater in half and half again to set beside him as his fingers pluck next at the buttons of his shirt. He wonders how he can hate him and love him at the same time. As he watches Hannibal continue to undress, he decides he does not care…at this particular moment.

satan sin death hogarth

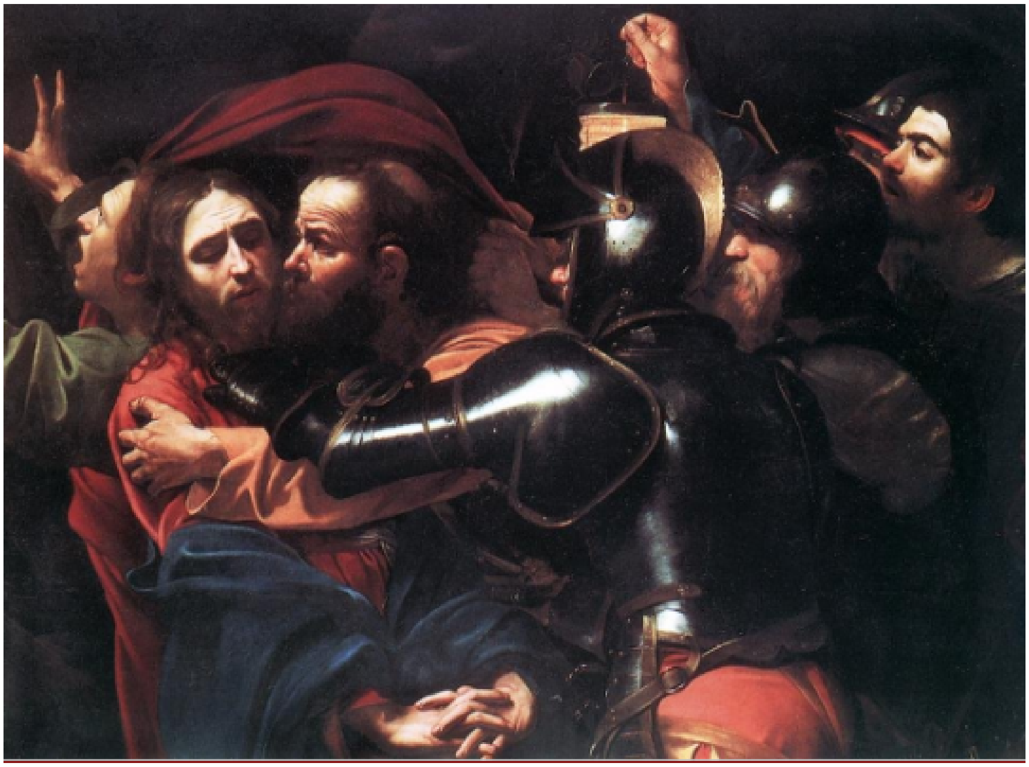
Satan Sin and Death, Hogarth 1735



Antonio Ciseri's *Martyrdom of the Maccabees* (1863),



Pietro Novelli, Cain killing Abel 1670s



Betrayal of Christ, Caravaggio 1603

Antenor, Betrayer of Troy

Greek image, source unknown

Chapter End Notes

My sincere apologies that the crazy psychopath sex must be postponed. I could post it sloppy and quick but I prefer to post sloppy and slow. The co-axel went on my front end (of my car) Friday at work. And...I left my cell phone at home. I was HOURS waiting for a tow Friday night and spent Saturday getting it repaired. So, I think I absorbed enough Friday the 13th bad luck for everybody! Will post asap or next weekend. I know I what I said...but stuff happens.

Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Will’s hallucinogen filled trip takes him back to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane after Daniel gets his crazy psychopath sex. Hannibal has received some intel on Will from Roberta just in time to send invitations. Bedelia gives Hannibal a call about the roses.

Will turns to the paralyzed Chilton. Chilton’s mouth moves but no words will come out. Movement registers in Will’s periphery. He swings and smashes the Taser into the side of the guard’s head shattering bone. Blood seeps from the man’s skull, dampening cropped hair in a sea of red to drip profusely onto his light blue collar.

Will watches him sink to the floor. He drops the ruined Taser thinking that he used the Taser rather effectively.

Handcuffs. He repeats to Chilton.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 57

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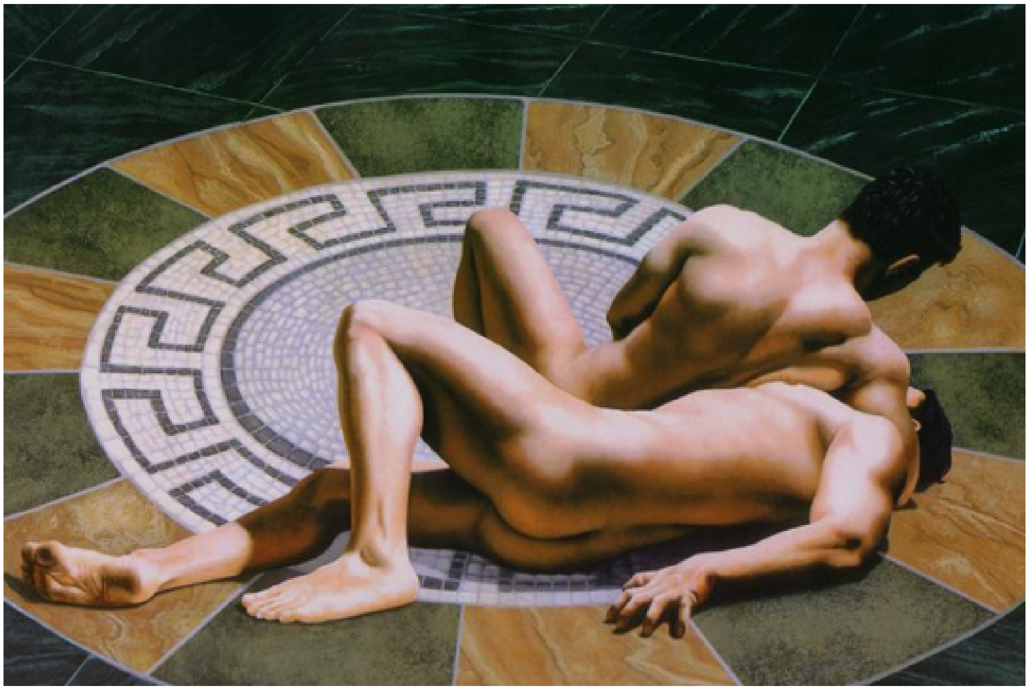

"The Greek Key" 2003 acrylic on canvas, 36" X 48"

http://stevewalkerartist.com/thumbnail_page_4.html

Daniel lies pinned beneath Will who looms over him, open mouthed and panting. He dips his head to look into Daniel's face, arms pressing Daniel's shoulders into the mattress with crushing ferocity.

Daniel holds up two fingers the way Will had showed him. Will grins, practically snarling and kisses him full on the mouth.

"That's three." Will says triumphantly, thumbs digging into sore shoulders sharply in case there was any doubt.

"I can count*."* Daniel returns between gasps of air.

Daniel does not wrestle. He has never wrestled until now. And his crash course in the sport has left him with a profound appreciation for the athleticism it requires. He reminds himself that winning one round with Will was lucky. He's not sure Will has heard any of his actual comments or if Will is responding to his own inner dialogue. Will seems to be reacting to him physically in real time, but Daniel is certain he is hearing only half a conversation he is not party to. There has not been much conversation between the gasps and grunts. Will's imagination continues to astound.

Daniel knows what three pins means. So does Will. The anticipation twists in every limb, every sinuous movement in the tip of his tongue as it curls over teeth and lips into Daniel's open mouth. Will is breathless with desire and need. Daniel can feel the longing in the way his mouth clings to Daniel's afraid to let his lips wander too far. Will's hands have moved from Daniel's shoulders to cradle Daniel's face so that every breath between them is shared and seamless.

The longing is not limited to the aching in Daniel's chest. Already bathed in sweat from the match, Daniel slides easily beneath Will's taut body, to and fro, the friction becoming unbearable and yet Daniel wants more, to be madly unbearably thick and hard with the torture of it. He can't press his body against Will enough and remembers he is feeling Will's feelings mingling with his own.

Will can't get close enough either. He's not even coming up for air as he grabs handfuls of hair and sucking on Daniel's tongue with such abandon Daniel thinks he might pull it loose. He manages to wrest away only to feel teeth drag along his throat from ear to front, lips trembling over his jugular savoring the pulse before sinking teeth into flesh, not to break but to bruise.

Daniel squirms. The bite is much harder than Will's usual nibbling, and the urgency is much more, well, urgent. He grabs at the damp curls in the back of Will's head and draws him back a little. He finds himself at the mercy of strong biceps as fingers fervently contract around his throat to press against his windpipe as Will shakes his head at him. Daniel quickly relaxes his grip of Will's hair and Will's grip on his throat loosens, a little. Will's delicious mouth curls up in a friendly warning. Or invitation. Daniel can't decide which.

"Will?"

The mouth cups his jaw and teeth pluck at the tender skin beneath clear down to collarbone, a favorite spot frequently targeted and the angry bruise flares with each pinch of Will's teeth. The tortuous torment of the teeth tugging at his flesh rivals the throbbing between his legs as Will grinds him into the mattress, skin soaked to bone with sweat it is so hot in the room.

Teeth scrape along his skin, and Daniel moans softly as Will drags his tongue to a nipple. He bites. Hard. The clamping of teeth on the tender nub sends Daniel off the pillow, but Will's hand remains clenched at his throat, and he doesn't even look up.

"Will!"

Daniel wriggles and grabs at Will's sweaty fingers trying to pry them off, and he immediately feels the tightening of Will's grip around his larynx. He removes his hand to cradle Will's head instead as his fingers ruffle damp locks. Another bite, and another and Daniel begins to acclimate to the pain and lifts from the bed to press his chest against Will's mouth, the twisting of flesh sending pulses of pleasure straight to his cock.

Daniel understands Will thinks he is with Hannibal and he expected that any sex they might have would reflect that but the pang of jealousy he feels won't go away. It gnaws at him like the scraping of Will's teeth along his throat and collarbone. Knowing that Will isn't really seeing him hurts. He has been feeling Will's emotions throughout his experience and there is no doubt in Daniel's mind that his therapy has indeed helped Will knock down some forts and examine his associations and inspirations for what they truly are.

This is not the Will he knows in this bed with him. Will's inner demon has been released in another bed and he is not holding back for Daniel, because Daniel isn't here with him right now. Daniel is seeing what only one other person has ever seen in Will. The demon laughs in his ear and laps at the lobes before delivering another body shuddering bite. Will's hips grind against him, his cock rubbing rigid along his.

"Ow!" Daniel cries out. "You damned near ripped my ear off. Stop it."

Will pays him no attention whatsoever.

“Will?” Daniel tugs at his hair. “Hey! Christ…how deep did you go?” Daniel mutters.

Will pushes off and places his hands on either side of Daniel’s shoulders to rest flat upon the bed. He looks down into Daniel’s face and his eyes are dark and appraising as he angles his head to one side.

“Petulance is unbecoming, Will. Especially when you enjoy losing so much.”

Daniel blinks as he realizes that at some point during the wrestling match, Will shifted his perspective…to Hannibal. Daniel is Will. Though he is Will physically, Will is still playing both parts in his head. Daniel is merely the warm body bridging their conversation and this intimate encounter. Daniel tells himself Will survived his intimate encounters with Hannibal. At least the ones in bed.

Daniel marvels he feels excited and fearful at the same time. Perhaps Will always did…does, too. Daniel can’t be sure of his emotions. There are far too many emotions in the mix.

As he stares into Will’s face, he can see the subtle change. There is an arrogance there that is not Will. And mingling with the longing and need lurks a prideful possessiveness apparent in the way Will gazes at him. Daniel has never felt so exposed or vulnerable as he does in this moment. And that too is deliciously exciting.

“Fuck…I hope I don’t regret this.” Daniel mutters as he twists up off the mattress.

He doesn’t twist far before he is pressed back down into the mattress.

Daniel stares into pale blue eyes that aren’t seeing him at all. Daniel cannot imagine what it is like to stare at yourself because that must be who Will is seeing in his hallucination. Will drags his lips up Daniel’s throat, open mouthed kisses along his jaw until he feels hot breath in his hair. Will’s thick curls hang in his face and Will’s fingers wind around Daniel’s own limp curls holding them taut against his scalp.

“I never take from you more than you are willing to give, Will.”

Will releases Daniel and begins to nip along his chest, chewing nipples and skin on the graze down sending tingles like volts of electricity. Daniel’s entire body is alight with sensation in the close and humid bedroom, the air saturated with the smell of sweat and the thick musk of desire.

The mass of curls brushes softly over his stomach as Will’s hands move along his thighs pushing them apart, thumbs grinding wickedly into the muscle of his inner thighs clear up to his balls.

“Mine…” Will mumbles between nibbles of flesh.

Daniel throws his head back into the recesses of the pillow and arches up from the mattress, fingers searching along the sheet for enough fabric to steady him. He whines into the pillow unable to help himself as tongue and teeth tease the length of his cock with excruciatingly slow precision. He sucks in air with the touch of moistened tongue on the tip and his fingers clench at warm and wrinkled sheets as Will begins to suck, drawing him in little by little.

Daniel thinks he might lose his mind, the emotions are so raw between them he feels like his skin has been peeled back exposing sensitive tissue and enflamed nerves. He knows his own feelings are compounded by Will’s and Will’s emotions are in turmoil jacked up with drugs and memories.

Daniel groans with pleasure as his cock hits the back of Will's throat and he thinks this is Will's brain on steroids. He could use their exit word and bring Will out of the trance. He could have Will here with him for the rest of his trip. But Daniel knows he won't. Daniel doesn't dare miss this. He is about to be eaten alive by Hannibal Lecter.

The taste of salt and metal prickles on his tongue as Will licks the blood from the corner of his mouth. The blood continues to trickle from his swollen lips stretched too tightly, lips he has let slip from around Hannibal's cock in order to soothe the tiny split and he is roused from his momentary lapse of attention with a jerk to his scalp, jarring his fraught senses. Hannibal's fingers twist around his hair to guide his head back down. Will shudders at the nudge to the back of this throat.

Hannibal moans softly between clenched teeth as he rocks his hips against Will's bobbing head. At the moment, there is nothing as soft or pliable as Will's mouth when it hangs slack like this. Hannibal had pleasured Will earlier, teasing himself with the taste of musk and sweat and the sensation of Will's hardened flesh twitching along his tongue and throat, delicious and alive. He left Will unsatisfied and the simple tap of his thumb upon Will's chin had sent Will to his knees, fingers carefully peeling back foreskin to caress the flaming bulb of flesh with moist lips as gently as he would his own.

Hannibal had fairly swooned in pleasure as Will had swallowed the length of him, eyes closed in concentration, damp curls plastered about his head. Will's hands remain on Hannibal's thighs and Hannibal relishes every flex of Will's fingers as they contract, a veritable vice that holds him in place while Hannibal assaults his mouth. Will's cock arches rigid from between his legs, and Hannibal knows Will is painfully aware of the throbbing, is taking pleasure from the tension that builds in the absence of touch.

Hannibal takes a few more indulgent stabs before pulling away allowing the tender exposed tip of his cock to graze deliciously along the edges of Will's teeth. He holds Will's head up as pale blue eyes widen into focus and his tongue flicks along blood stained lips. He watches Will swallow, a sensuous ripple of movement along his throat that Hannibal never tires of watching.

Will smacks his lips, enjoying the searing soreness that pressing them together brings. He parts his lips to meet Hannibal's as the fingers still entwined in his hair tug his head back. Hannibal's tongue finds the tiny cut. Will flinches as it opens further to the roll of tongue and teeth as Hannibal sucks at the wound until Will feels nothing but the throbbing of his cock.

Satisfied, Hannibal pushes a couple fingers into Will's mouth, slowly until both fingers are glazed with saliva. As he pulls his fingers free from Will's bruised and swollen mouth Will lifts his eyes. The gleam of the predator flickers behind the blue as Will wipes a hand across his mouth and grins savagely. Hannibal licks his fingers.

Bed. Bottom up.

It's about time…

Will rises from the rug, and climbs onto the plush bed of soft satin that smells of the spiced leather and sandalwood he remembers. He reclines in the center, resting on his knees body coiled and then slowly stretches his arms taut and luxuriates in the sensation of the silky fabric gliding over his skin as he settles upon the mattress. He has missed this. He hates that he misses it…Hannibal. Will concentrates on the way the satin sends his nerves on edge and the tip of his cock on fire.

Hannibal is an unapologetic sensualist, ever seeking to indulge all his senses simultaneously and as provocative as smell and touch and…taste can be, with Will it is the visual Hannibal finds most stimulating. Hannibal strokes his cock already a rock in his hands as he watches Will draw his knees under his body. He watches the naked predator beneath him surrender to his urges stretching his arms out toward the headboard so that every muscle along his body is accentuated in the firelight. Will turns his head to the side baring teeth as he waits, drawing deep even breaths.

This is the Will Hannibal desires and dreams of. This is the Will that Will keeps locked up but he handed the key to Hannibal and he can no longer pretend the door is closed. The doors to Will's mind have been flung wide and the sensations wracking his body confuse and titillate, leaving him open to associations that flood his consciousness as he assumes the alternating perspectives of himself and Hannibal.

He knows it's the hallucinogens wreaking havoc and he is helpless to control the effects. Scarlatti echoes maddeningly in his ears as he inhales the fragrance of the linens, aware of light and shadow dancing across the walls from the fire that crackles and pops. The weight on top shifts and he feels warm breath in his hair as the manicured fingers he knows so well slip between his open lips.

Hannibal pushes his fingers deep into Will's waiting mouth past the teeth to press down upon his wagging tongue. Sufficiently moistened, he withdraws and teases the pucker of flesh between the glorious twin cheeks of flesh and muscle at his fingertips. He slicks his cock with lube and applies a generous helping to Will reveling in the soft groans he hears muffled in the pillow.

I hate you for this.

I know.

Hannibal's fingers curl and twist inside as muscle clenches hot and tremulous around them.

And yet you do not give voice to the other emotions that burn.

It is…the dominant emotion.

Will grunts and moves with Hannibal's twisting. The thing in his stomach coils as feathers ruffle, and Will turns his head around to see the creature seated in one of the chairs by the fireplace behind Hannibal's head. He sighs, buries his head in the pillow and squirms further into the mattress as fingers widen and wriggle within.

Is it? Or is it the one you find most useful? All your associations of me are awash in it.

Hannibal opens his fingers wide eliciting the desired gasp from the pillow.

And does that wound?

Will hisses, the words lost in another gasp.

It motivates. I hoped you would embrace your nature.

I hate you for making me want…this. Wanting it… with you.

Hannibal withdraws his hand, caressing smooth skin as Will's body shifts, lifts higher to follow the movement, like metal to magnet. Hannibal bends over Will who stretches his arms to press hands against the headboard as Hannibal lowers his body to rest again along his back, stiff cock prodding the crack of his ass. He runs his hands over Will's flesh, licks at the beads of perspiration along tense shoulders.

Hate is proportional to the action that prompted it. Hate motivates us to action or reaction. Your hate combined with anger compelled you to try and kill me.

His tongue laps at Will's neck drawing another audible hiss.

Have you determined which emotion stopped you?

I suppose the same emotion that draws me to this bed, again and again.

Is this bed your inferno, Will?

This is your design…for me.

A design for us. A design you helped create. You are the architect and yet you will not see the beauty of your own design.

The penetration is sweet as always. Will never disappoints. Hannibal pummels soft giving flesh, heady with the aromas of sex and sweat, flush with the spoils of surrender writhing beneath him. The strokes are long, the thrusts powerful and the moans from Will excite Hannibal to thrust more deeply so they rock as one upon the mattress.

So slick. So tight. The pressure builds, unbearable this addiction to him, to Will, his precious infuriating Will. Insufferable that Hannibal could give up so much…for a lie. Hannibal slams Will hard into the mattress and it feels like he is ripping him apart. He pays no attention to the cries muffled in the pillow, takes no notice of teeth tearing at sheets as he relentlessly assaults the flesh he both loves and hates for the weakness it exploits within.

I believed you…

Will's sob erupts with Hannibal's release that gushes hot from tortured flesh and Hannibal collapses nearly numb with pleasure, as his cock slips out the very air sends him to shuddering as sticky sweet trails follow to score along cheeks still quivering from the tumultuous pounding of a moment ago.

And you punish me still. Will whines from the pillow.

You…wanted this. Hannibal pants, breath still coming in gasps.

Will draw his legs up, hands wrapped around his own cock, threads of white drip through trembling fingers as his body trembles and shudders against Hannibal's. Hannibal looks down upon the bruised lips and tightly shut eyes, lashes as wet as the curls framing the face Hannibal loves so much. Whether twisted in agony or pleasure, Will's face is beautiful, a work of art Hannibal is compelled to recreate over and over again in the countless charcoals he draws. His way of keeping the thing he loves close.

Hannibal slides along the rumpled sheets to rest at Will's side. He grasps shoulders that resist his efforts to turn toward him. Will flops onto his back, unwilling to lie on his side to face Hannibal, unable to look into his eyes just yet. He looks up at the ceiling instead, wetting his lips as his mind absorbs and assimilates a fretful frown cutting deep creases into his otherwise perfect features.

I hate what I've become. I hate what you did to me. And I hate that I let you do it.

Will ignores the rustling of feathers in front of the fireplace. He listens to the crackling of the fire and the sounds of Chopin…some prelude he can't recall…relying on the familiar to soothe his frayed nerves.

Did Adam hate God?

Your conceit knows no bounds, Hannibal. Will's lips curl in contempt.

Will's curiosity overrules the disdain, however. His body at rest, his nerves calm and his urges sated, he feels more like himself and he is fully aware of how relative his feelings are at any given moment. Relatively speaking, he feels more like himself than he feels like Hannibal. His imagination has returned him to himself and he is no longer looking at himself upon the bed through Hannibal's eyes, an experience he does not want to repeat anytime soon. He turns his thoughts back to Hannibal's question. His question. He laughs at himself for waiting for Hannibal's answer. His answer. Will thinks there is no litmus test for how crazy he is.

He turns in the bed, kicking at satin to stare into Hannibal's' face, to run his fingers through silky strands of ash blonde hair that fall over one brow. Hannibal's eyes narrow slightly at the touch and something like a purr rumbles in his throat.

Why would Adam hate God? Will asks. *For punishing him?*

For creating him.

For creating him? You infer that I blame you for creating me?

Don't you?

I take my share of the blame.

Blame. A curious choice of a word to assign to Fate. Did Adam blame God for creating the circumstances that precipitated his fall?

The tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Back to this old chestnut of ours.

The discussion is a salient one. Considering that you've condemned yourself to your inferno. Did Adam hate God?

Well, he didn't thank him.

Didn't he? The bible would have us believe that man has worshipped God ever since. Imagine, thanking God for sentencing all of mankind to mortality.

As if Adam had a choice. That was God's design, Hannibal.

Adam had choices because God left him choices in that garden. Imagine he had made a different choice. The bible relates a narrative to promulgate an entire belief system, but there is an entirely different belief when one considers the alternative.

Adam could have resisted the temptation to taste the apple.

Yes. Suppose he had taken an apple from the other tree?

Hannibal's knuckles caress his cheek and Will knows his fingers will be twisting in his hair soon enough. Will wants him to. He hates that he wants…

Both trees and their fruit were forbidden. Eating from either would have resulted in God's punishment. Will says, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

But only one of them would have resulted in achieving a state of being immune to God's punishment. An act of hubris God could neither condone nor punish.

Eating of the tree of life would have made Adam immortal, Will pauses, *Like God.*

Perhaps God was testing his Adam. Adam chose Eve and mortality rather than become more like God. The Judeo-Christian adoption of pagan myth.

To avoid the sin of hubris. And I suppose God was saddened by Adam's choice? Will says.

Will can't help the smile that twists on his lips. Hannibal is so transparent. Hannibal presses a finger into Will's collarbone, waits for the grimace and slides the finger down along his sternum until it rests above his heart.

You think God did not weep for Adam? To be parted from him, no longer able to walk in the garden with him, their contact reduced to a pale imitation of what it once was – lips moving in prayer in a vain attempt to feel…intimacy.

You continue to equate yourself with God. Will says.

Hannibal smiles patiently as he twirls damp curls between his fingers.

God is an ideal. A concept. I have a concept of God as I have a concept of good and evil, and of you.

So, Adam ate from the wrong tree. God had hoped… Will pauses for emphasis, *…that Adam would disobey and partake from the tree of life to join God in divine bliss?*

If God created Adam in his own image, then God could not help but love that image, that ideal, and placed those choices before his creation to see what he would do.

Have I partaken of the wrong tree? The FBI becomes the serpent in your analogy?

Does it? Perhaps the FBI is Eve in the garden. Why are you in Florence, Will?

To correct a mistake. Your ideal of me is…inaccurate. You can't reduce me to set of influences, even your own. I'm not the product of anything.

I you cannot be reduced, then neither can I. But, your ideals can be reduced to a set of influences rooted in religion. Roots that hold you fast in the soil of limitation.

Right and wrong, good and evil are necessary in the world outside the garden. Will says.

They are concepts. Religion is a means to control the environment, control society. It enhances survival in the face of natural selection.

That's a reductionist view, don't you think? To reduce religion to a means of survival? To something as simple as survival in numbers.

Conformity breeds contempt for the non-conformist.

I selected myself for exclusion, I know. And I knowingly ate the forbidden fruit. It has destroyed me.

It destroyed a part of you so you could be reborn.

Now you play the role of Shiva, my destroyer and my creator?

Didn't you destroy yourself, piece by piece? Jack offered you a way out, more than once, and you refused each time.

I was saving lives.

Then you can't whine about losing your own. Or blame me for what you replaced those missing pieces with.

Will looks away from Hannibal and lets his gaze wander up and long the walls. Hannibal's Japanese prints surround the headboard but Will's gaze is drawn to the print of the samurai embattled with the Tengu. He sits up on his elbow to have a better look.

Ah, the Tengu. Hannibal says, glancing behind him, *I suppose the FBI have the little statue now. I would have kept us safe, Will. You should have trusted me.*

You took my trust and abused it, as you abused me.

Will feels the familiar movement beneath the scar along his stomach. Hannibal uncurls his fingers from his hair and drops his hand to rest on the wound. Will watches blood ooze and drip from Hannibal's fingers.

I took nothing from you that you weren't prepared to give, Will.

As Will stares at Hannibal's blood soaked fingers he feels a trickling along his lips. He wipes a finger across his wet lips to find them smeared with fresh blood, dark and red along his finger. He licks at the corners, the taint of iron rust strong upon his tongue and he swallows it down, pressing a hand against his mouth.

Beware of limitations, Will.

Hannibal raises a blood stained hand to caress his face and Will feels the scraping of talons across his skin. Will smells the acrid pungent odor and it permeates the room as the fire blazes and the music swells. Blood. It seems Will has been swimming in it interminably. Blood. The elixir of life. No wonder it tastes so bitter.

Will lifts a trembling hand to cover Hannibal's. Hannibal looks into Will's upturned face, a rueful smile upon his lips where a dark pool of red gathers at one corner to spill down his chin. His teeth and tongue are stained with blood as well. The entire bed is now drenched, their bodies entwined in blood, breath and heat beneath the soiled sheets.

Anticipating regret impacts decisions and clouds perspective. You would still put me in a cage?

The anticipation of being filled with regret for locking up the monster?

You are riddled with regret. Your experience at Baltimore State Hospital with me is an extension of your inferno. You are anticipating regret as you prepare to meet me again.

I regret that I want…what I cannot have. That I can only have it…have you like this.

Like Adam? Your fantasies approximate a prayer, Will. You can have whichever tree you want; you have only to reach up and grab the fruit.

Will closes his eyes to the taste of blood as Hannibal's lips press against his, and the blood lingers upon his tongue deliciously tart like an apple and almost as sweet.

Will starts from his bed and the metal frame quakes and squeaks as he rolls to his side to sit up. He stares at the dank stone of his cell. He is in Baltimore State Hospital. He glances at his clothes and sighs at the sight of the familiar gray jumpsuit. He rolls his tongue over teeth glazed from sleep and attempts to moisten dry lips. He decides he needs a drink of water and hangs his head over the sink, turns on the faucet.

Bad dreams, Will?

Hannibal's voice comes muffled from beyond the wall of the adjacent cell. Will finishes his drink, shuts off the water. He knows Chilton records every conversation. Hannibal knows it, too. The question is deliberate, designed to introduce a specific train of thought. Will will have to play along to find out what it is exactly that Hannibal wants to communicate.

I was dreaming of you. Is that a good dream or a bad dream? Will says to the wall that separates them.

Still a tease. Does your inner voice haunt you today?

I hear you less and less. Will says to the Hannibal in the cell and closes his eyes. He is only lying to himself.

That breach of individual separateness remains.

I'm working on that.

I imagine it's easier for you to believe that I'm responsible for you being here than it is to accept that you are.

Plenty of responsibility to go around.

And regret.

And regret.

The door buzzes and clicks and the sound of shoes upon cement and the squeak of wheels in need of oil announce the arrival of breakfast. An orderly rolls the cart up to Will's cell. Will smells sausage and eggs and his stomach turns somersaults. He takes the tray anyway and decides he can manage the eggs and biscuit. The orange juice is actually cold. Will is surprised Hannibal takes his tray as well. At least Will assumes he did. The orderly isn't ducking.

The orderly leaves them to eat in silence. He'll come for the trays later. Will thinks of his inferno and puzzles why his trip brought him back here. His dreams are preparing him for waking life. Will wonders if he can still tell the difference.

You meet with your therapist today? Hannibal says.

Hopefully. Will says.

Will hears another familiar buzz and click of the door. He listens to the footsteps and decides it must be Chilton. He stands in the middle of the cell and waits.

Good morning, Will.

Frederick. What brings you down here this morning?

I bring tidings of great joy. Your psychiatrist, your…other psychiatrist will be here at nine. You'll have twenty minutes in the cage with him.

A whole twenty minutes?

Hmmmm. Yes. I can make if fifteen.

Twenty will be plenty. Anything else on the agenda?

For you, no.

You can't keep me here, Frederick.

We'll see. Unfortunately, the fact that your own therapist sent you to Lecter in hopes of jogging your memory suggests a certain desperation.

Did he tell you I was desperate?

His actions make him look desperate. At least it will be construed that way at the preliminary hearing. I'm confident that there is enough evidence for the Grand Jury to indict.

Indict me on your word? And Hannibal's? Will almost laughs aloud.

And the guards who used the Taser on you.

You used the Taser on me.

I don't remember it that way.

That's a lot of palm greasing, Frederick. Taking quite an advance on your retirement fund, aren't you?

Trying to figure out the divergence in your pathologies poses quite the challenge.

Nice to know you are assuming there is a divergence.

Two intelligent psychopaths. One with heightened empathy and the other…completely bereft of the ability. In fact, I'm writing a paper right now…

Don't bore our poor Will so early in the morning, Frederick.

Good morning, Hannibal.

Chilton walks out a ways from Will and over so he can stand in front of Hannibal's cell. He stands several feet away from the bars and Will can't help but bite at his lower lip. Not even Hannibal can reach that far.

Be grateful boredom is all you are subjected to. If you could behave you could have some of your things returned and I wouldn't have to medicate you so much.

Perhaps if I pay enough attention to you Frederick, you might become interesting. But I doubt it. A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans…and an exquisite chianti.

Hannibal sucks in his breath and Will can see Chilton's horrified expression as he hears Hannibal smack his lips as though slurping up sauce from his plate.

Your sense of humor has not improved, Hannibal. Chilton says, straightening his tie. *In fact, it leaves a lot to be desired.*

Your tongue is still very feisty, Frederick.

Hannibal's words have the desired effect. Chilton's eyes widen and his mouth, half of it, falls open.

Frederick, Will says in hopes of drawing Frederick back to his cell.

Hannibal has never eaten or killed any census takers as far as Will knows. The census taker is an imaginary composite Hannibal uses when making a joke…or sending a message. Will needs time to think.

I hope you're not going to regale me with stories of cannibalism…

You think we're so alike. Is that why you colluded with Hannibal to trap me here? He gets a neighbor and you get your psychopath duet?

Not just any neighbor. The object of his obsession. And I get to pick both your brains. Hannibal is an opportunist, you know that.

And you're not.

I am the keeper of the keys and I'll be keeping them for the foreseeable future. You are in my kingdom now.

Beware the Ides of March. Hannibal says as Will watches fingers curl around the bars.

The fingers become smothered in black feathers and talons now grip the steel. Will looks back to Chilton.

Chilton tosses his head and sighs. *Doctor Clayton will be arriving soon. I'll be there for the visit.* Chilton turns to leave.

Don't you record conversations anymore? Will says to Chilton's back. Will listens to the buzzer.

He'll run back to his office to listen. One would think us his only patients. Hannibal says. *So predictable, our Frederick.*

Will considers the concept of predictability. Hannibal is also predictable, at least his habits and routines are. Or would be if he weren't medicated. Hannibal's census taker nags at the back of Will's mind.

Not much time before your visitor, Will. What do you see?

I see the ninth circle of hell does not include Caesar. Et tu, Brute?

Et tu, Cassius?

Will can imagine the smile on Hannibal's face on the other side of the wall.

Misery loves company. Will says.

The greater part of misery - or happiness - depends not so much on disposition but circumstances.

Will blinks and finds himself in the mezzanine staring out at Chilton and the winged Daniel from his seat within the claustrophobic cage. Daniel's right wing still droops and Will feels badly about that. Daniel flaps his pearly white wings slightly and the green eyes crease as he smiles a gentle smile. Of course, Daniel feels Will's regret. Will hears the sound of scraping echo within the cavernous mezzanine.

Will glances down either end of the mezzanine He sees the serpent's tail of the creature twitching along the steps at the far end and Will's eyes follow the scaly tail to find the black feathered creature perched upon the stairs watching them from the shadows.

The devil is not as dark as he appears, Will. Winged Daniel says.

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream. Will says.

Dreams prepare us for waking life.

Time's up. Chilton says, looking at the winged Daniel. *Your imagination continues to astound. He looks like you.*

Will ignores Chilton's remarks in favor of asking a question. *What kind of medication is Hannibal on?*

Trying to anticipate what's on the menu for you? A monoamine oxidase inhibitor. I'm using it to treat…

I know what it's for. You've diagnosed him with generalized depression from being locked up. You're trying to treat his anxiety and depression with it because other anti-depressants aren't working. It's the closest thing to a sedative you can give him without it actually being a sedative.

Your understanding of psychiatry is impressive. The MAOI he's getting is the only thing that appears to have an effect on him.

Will nods lost in thought as he allows the orderly to cuff him for the walk back to his cell. Chilton follows close behind. Associations come quickly and Will realizes Hannibal is not taking his medication. Will thinks it likely he never has. He pretends to take it, or can detect which food Chilton puts it in. Hannibal's pretend meal of the census taker contains the three foods that block the effects of MAOIs. Hannibal has, in fact, been performing for Frederick since he arrived.

The way any animal thinks depends on limitations of mind and body. If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn our power…

Hannibal has enjoyed indulging his more primal instincts, but Brutus has been conning Caesar in order to bring Cassius to the forum. Will glances at the guard next to him and figures they have about half a minute before they arrive at the doors to the hall leading to his cell, and Hannibal's.

You're applying yourself to my perspective. As I've been applying myself to yours.

The control booth is located right next to the door. Will thinks the architect of that design might find himself out of a job after this.

Anticipating regret commonly results in dubious decisions. You must adapt your behavior to avoid feeling the same way again, Will.

Will takes a deep controlled breath and exhales slowly, closing his eyes as he pictures the layout of the control room and cells. As they approach the control room and doors, Will turns, bends low and quickly pops his left thumb dislocating it successfully from behind. It hurts like hell but he manages to slip off the one cuff. He sees Chilton and the orderly turn but not quickly enough.

Will pushes the orderly through the open doorway leading to the control room. The guard springs from his chair and reaches for his Taser.

Will uses the stunned orderly as shield and weapon. He shoves the orderly into the guard, effectively immobilizing him momentarily. The guard fumbles against the control panel, losing his grip on the Taser as his hands reach out to grab anything to break his fall. Will slams the confused orderly to the floor. He spies the Taser near the doorway.

Will twists and stoops to pick up the Taser from the floor. The guard moves to rush him. Will shakes his head at him. He points the Taser at the guard and the guard freezes. Will watches his eyes shift between him, the orderly, and Chilton who stands behind Will, useless as ever.

He already has the orderly on the floor, his shoes grind against his throat prepared to crush the fragile trachea that lies beneath. Muscles quiver to the pressure of Will's foot. The guard hesitates, unsure of himself as he tries to calculate which actions will result in the least injury. Or continued employment.

Will turns his head toward Chilton not taking his eyes off the guard.

Keys for the handcuffs. Will says.

The guard takes a step closer reaching for the keys that dangle from his belt.

Not you. Him.

Will turns to the paralyzed Chilton. Chilton's mouth moves but no words will come out. Movement registers in Will's periphery. He swings and smashes the Taser into the side of the guard's head shattering bone. Blood seeps from the man's skull, dampening cropped hair in a sea of red to drip profusely onto his light blue collar.

Will watches him sink to the floor. He drops the ruined Taser thinking that he used the Taser rather effectively.

Handcuffs. He repeats to Chilton.

Chilton scrambles to the floor to wrest the keys from the belt of the terrified orderly still pinned beneath Will's foot.

Take the keys from the guard, Frederick.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Chilton says, fingers shaking so badly he can barely remove the keys. He stands up finally with keys in hand. Will turns slightly so Chilton can unlock the cuffs foot still poised on top of the orderly's neck.

What…are you going to do? Chilton asks as Will lets the cuffs fall to land beside the orderly.

Before he can kick them away, Will feels movement beneath his foot unbalance him and the orderly wriggles out, grabbing the handcuffs as he springs from the floor. Chilton moves to run and Will grabs him by the coattails eyes still following the orderly. Chilton tries to scramble out of his designer jacket but Will uses the momentum to carry Chilton to the floor as the orderly swings the cuffs at Will's head.

Will ducks and lunges. To keep Chilton from leaving, Will knocks the stumbling orderly on top of Chilton. Chilton drops back to floor, the orderly piled on top. All Chilton can do is watch from beneath the body of the orderly who struggles to rise. Will tugs the handcuffs from his hands. The orderly is too young, too inexperienced to keep his wits about him. But not so young and inexperienced that he would not try to bash Will's skull again if given the chance.

Will gathers the chain of the cuffs in his hands, loops it around the dazed orderly's neck and pulls tight. He twists the chain until he hears the snapping of vertebrae and the orderly's head slumps against his shoulder.

Chilton looks up in horror from the floor. Will imagines Frederick is having a little trouble focusing about now. Will cracks his knuckles, ignoring the pain from his dislocated thumb, and looks around for something to use as weapon to induce cooperation from Chilton. He looks at Chilton and decides he doesn't need one.

You wanted to see me in action, Frederick?

Will scans the control panel and locates the key pad that controls the entrance door and the doors to the cells.

Is there a code? Or can I just press the button?

What button? Oh my god…Will! You can't… You can't be seriously considering letting him loose? You're the one who put him in here…

Show me how to open the doors Frederick, or I'll do it myself. Without your help.

Will figures there must be silent alarms going off somewhere alerting the local police of a potential security breach. He cracks another knuckle and Chilton bites his lip. Will grabs an arm and pulls Chilton to his feet.

How do I open the doors, Frederick?

Chilton stares at him sullenly and Will thinks he must be counting the seconds before some security override kicks in. Will chooses a button and hits it. The door to the control booth closes. Chilton jumps.

Will does not have time for this. He grabs Chilton by the collar and slams his face into the door jamb. Chilton screams in pain.

He'll kill me…

But, he probably won't have time to eat you, Frederick. Stop stalling.

If I help…?

Maybe I'll have some influence. Open…the…doors.

Chilton sobs all the way over to the control panel. He holds his nose as blood pours from nostrils and he heaves through his mouth, but he finds the correct buttons and punches in a code that Will memorizes. The buzzer sounds and Will hears the door click open, all the cell doors open. The door to the control booth slides open, too.

Will drags Chilton out of the control booth and shoves him through the doorway that leads to the hall of unlocked and open cells. He has to drag him down the corridor. Chilton begins to become dead weight in Will's arms as they get closer to the trim figure standing in a gray jumpsuit at the end of the corridor.

I'm afraid you've misdiagnosed just about everything. Will says as they reach Hannibal. *He's not depressed or anxious. You pissed him off, Frederick.*

Chilton cringes and takes desperate swipes at his nose to staunch the flow of blood to no avail.

You enjoyed my joke, didn't you, Will. Too bad Frederick didn't get it.

I think he gets it now.

I told you, you shouldn't have come. I'm afraid I've dragged you into my world.

I think I got here on my own. But I appreciate the company.

Will hands off the trembling Chilton to Hannibal. Hannibal holds Chilton close by the collar of his shirt that hangs from slumped shoulders.

WILL! Chilton screams into Will's face. Will raises his brows and looks to Hannibal. His thumb is throbbing and Will massages the dislocated joint before jamming it back into place. Hannibal nods appreciatively.

How's your heart rate? Hannibal asks reaching out a hand to touch Will's chest. He waits a long moment. *Ah..steady.*

Hannibal throws Chilton to the floor. Chilton stares up at both of them.

You're on camera, you know. Chilton says, his voice thin and hoarse. The voice of a man who knows he is about to die…horribly.

As if there would be any doubt. Hannibal says. *About that feisty tongue, Frederick.*

Will watches Hannibal take Chilton by the finely coiffed hair on his head and wretch his neck backwards. With the other hand he pries Chilton's mouth open wrapping his fingers around Chilton's tongue. Will winces as Hannibal pulls Chilton's tongue loose and rips it out of his mouth. He lets Chilton fall to the floor gasping and moaning as blood spurts over clothing and cement and Will's shoes.

Hannibal steps back holding his bloody souvenir.

The tongue is almost seventy five percent fat. Hannibal says looking at the tongue dangling from his fingers.

All sizzle and no substance. Will says.

No time for braising or smoking. I had imagined a Borscht Horseradish Terrine. Hungarian recipe if I recall.

There's always tar-tar.

Sirens wail in the distance and Will looks to Hannibal. Hannibal glances at the fleshy pink tongue in his hand and to Chilton heaving on the floor. He stoops down to peer into Chilton's face. Chilton's eyes stare into Hannibal's but Will doubts he really comprehends what is happening to him at this point. Hannibal straddles the limp Chilton and lets the tongue drop from stained fingers to the cement. He takes Chilton's head in his hands and deftly breaks his neck as he had done with Mason, only more effectively this time.

Life is full of regrets. But, you didn't allow the anticipation of regret to interfere with your decision this time.

No…but I feel it regardless.

That you do feel it is what makes you unique. Remember that feeling, too.

Will watches Hannibal rise from the floor. He wipes his hands on his jumpsuit, smearing the front crimson. He steps over Chilton's body and heads for the door at the far end of the corridor where the mezzanine is, and from there the stairs that lead to the main level. Where a SWAT team likely awaits.

Will remembers he is hallucinating. The SWAT team doesn't matter. That is not Chilton on the floor. Hannibal is not here, and neither is he. This is his inferno.

Feels good to do bad things to bad people, doesn't it? Hannibal says as he walks, surely expecting Will to follow.

Hannibal begins to climb the stairs. Will watches the jumpsuit recede as he walks, the naked muscular figure of flesh is soon replaced by black and oily feathers that sprout along limbs and torso until it is no longer Hannibal standing on the stairs, but a vision of shiny blue-black plumage with piercing black eyes that gaze luminously from the shadows at Will.

I won't be coming with you. I can't. Will says.

You deny the monster growing inside you?

I don't deny the monster. I don't deny that we're alone and alone without each other. I deny that we're just alike.

Alike does not mean the same, Will. Your empathy allows you to know me, understand me. But you are not me. Zeus does not want another swan. He wants the goose.

Will stands over Chilton. He can't deny the pleasure he took from the killing and neither can he deny the awesome feeling of power that overtook him as he methodically removed all the human detritus from his path. The shame and regret that he enjoyed it tears at him. He fears there will come a day when he feels nothing at all. He feels the sting of tears and blinks them back.

The creature on the stairs looks down at him from the steps as Will looks up from Chilton. He presses his lips together and turns his head as the room begins to spin. He hears Bach playing, one of his favorites, the prelude to his *Suite 2 in D minor* as rosebuds shimmer upon the stone walls of the corridor.

Your empathy allows you to see, Will. See into yourself. Are you ready to leave?

I…have a ticket. Will says. *I have a ticket.*

I have my ticket…right here.

Hannibal watches Luciano run on the treadmill as he thumbs through the current issue of *Bon Appetite*. Despite his smoking habit, Luciano can run at about six miles per hour steady for twenty minutes. Hannibal finds that impressive and most definitely sufficient. Luciano does not smoke here.

Luciano lifts the weights Hannibal provided for about half an hour before taking a rest of ten minutes and performing the exercises again. And again. Hannibal is pleased with the progress. Luciano will be delivering his invitation to Will and guest tomorrow evening if all goes well.

Lucia listens to her Ipod as she watches her brother run. She bobs her head in time to music Hannibal can thankfully not hear. Watching her bob her head and tap her feet reminds Hannibal of Clayton. Clayton does the same thing when he wears his earbuds. Hannibal had found the image of Clayton lip-synching and nodding his head profoundly disturbing. It had been like watching a Will he did not recognize. Better the devil you know…

His cell phone vibrates on the metal table containing his surgical instruments. Hannibal picks it up and sees the caller is Du Maurier. He will have to talk to her upstairs.

"Luciano!"

Luciano looks up at him from the treadmill. Hannibal holds up the phone. Luciano nods and Hannibal leaves him to finish his run to take his call in the privacy of the kitchen, or the garden

Hannibal thinks as sunlight streams from the veranda when he reaches the top of the steps.

Cajun spices waft from the pot on the stove where stock simmers. Hannibal has developed a craving for Jambalaya in anticipation of Will's RSVP. The twins will lap it up without question. In the short time they have been guests in his home, they have acclimated quite admirably to their surroundings and to Hannibal's expectations.

Hannibal imagines he feels something akin to a peculiar fondness for them. He considers what he feels is nothing comparable to what Will feels for his dogs, but perhaps he has developed a sense of responsibility. Much like the rancher who cares for his sheep, but sends them to slaughter nonetheless. They kill and eat what they love.

He walks out to the veranda so he can smell the aromas from his kitchen and relaxes into a chair that faces the garden. He takes a deep cleansing breath before redialing Du Maurier's number. She becomes ever more tiresome, but she too has a role to play.

"Hannibal." Du Maurier purrs. "How nice of you to return my call so soon."

Hannibal surmises from the slight drag of her syllables that she has had at least two glasses of wine, if not more. He pictures her liver suspended in a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc.

"You left no message. What choice did I have?" Hannibal says, his tone light.

"I received the lovely roses and wanted to thank you. Your note indicated you are rather pleased with my gift."

"I'm quite taken with him yes. What's the expression? He's just what the doctor ordered."

"He's perceptive. Did your session provide you with any insight?"

"In what regard? Into him, or myself?"

Du Maurier laughs softly. "Whichever is most beneficial to your well-being, Hannibal. He is meant to help heal a wound, is he not?"

Hannibal thinks prick his wound would be more accurate, but Du Maurier must be permitted to continue with her scripted farce a while longer. The queen must arrange her pieces if Hannibal is to correctly assess her moves.

"We talked of regret. Of anticipating and of accepting it as part of the healing process. Nothing I haven't heard before, but talking with him is pleasant enough."

"He seemed…well to you?"

"Had I not known about his ordeal, I would have never suspected he suffered such a regrettable miscalculation. Unfortunate that your evening was…spoiled."

"Yes, unfortunate but not without a silver lining. Insight often manifests in the unexpected and the spontaneous."

Hannibal walks to the kitchen to check on the stock. He glances at the clock.

"Did you manage to get the stain out of your rug?"

He hopes to change the topic from Clayton to whatever it is she really called about. Hannibal has obtained far more insight into Clayton than Du Maurier. Hannibal has a rapport with the younger man that is almost intimate in its…associations. To discuss him with her seems rude.

"The rug is being replaced this weekend. I'm afraid it couldn't be salvaged." Du Maurier pauses.

Hannibal wonders if she needs a swallow of wine or time to think. He stirs the stock while he waits and tosses in another handful of fresh cut cilantro. Not a traditional ingredient, but Will had suggested it and Hannibal had enjoyed the spiciness of its inclusion.

"Any word on the transfer?" Du Maurier says. "I've had to sign papers I already signed."

"I apologize for that. Lawyers earn their reputations, don't they? I've had to involve yet a third law firm, one that deals with extra-national interests to manage the assets so that the FBI could not trace anything from Will's end. The original papers you signed are of no use now."

"You're saying the process has to begin all over again." Du Maurier manages without even a hint of the exasperation Hannibal knows she must be feeling.

"Not exactly. It will go more quickly this time. The loopholes have been addressed. At least, that is what I have been told."

"And the time frame, now?"

"A couple weeks, ten days perhaps."

"This new law firm hasn't located Mr. Graham by any chance have they?" Du Maurier smacks her lips and Hannibal imagines Du Maurier swirling her wine while considering posing that inquiry.

"Not yet, but I am hopeful. Since we are partners in this enterprise and we are seeking to resume our previous relationship I feel I should disclose some information to you."

"Oh? Protecting our assets is always my concern. How does this information impact on our assets?"

"There is no direct impact, but the information indirectly affects the transfer. It's about Will."

Hannibal savors the complete silence at the other end. Hannibal knows Du Maurier's mind is racing with the possibilities even as she counts the seconds ticking by that she does not speak.

"What have you learned that could possibly affect the transfer if no one knows where he is?"

"Well, someone must know."

Hannibal looks out over the garden from the veranda. He has poured himself a glass of wine. He tells himself he is enjoying this game far too much for his own good. His cousin phoned earlier with information about Will from her friend in D.C. Hannibal has parsed it especially for Du Maurier and will leak it to her a little at time.

A long sigh from Du Maurier and then, "Shall I open another bottle?"

"I suppose that would depend on whether or not you feel like celebrating. I have engaged a private investigator to find Will."

“That…actually makes sense.”

“The investigator has reason to believe the FBI has placed him in witness protection in the Florida Keys. He is expected to testify against me in exchange for dropped charges. It is the only way that he will not be prosecuted and the only way he can ever be free of the FBI.”

“How reliable is this investigator?”

Hannibal is not surprised she would ask. She likely believes Hannibal will set the investigator on her. If she is colluding with Jack Crawford, she would be concerned that Hannibal’s investigator might stumble onto that information as well.

“Apparently, Either Kade Purnell or Jack Crawford set it up, but my investigator is still trying to verify that. Agent Crawford is not very forthcoming. And…” Hannibal pauses for effect. “I hesitate to mention this given your…feelings about him.”

“I may not approve of your hobbies, Hannibal, but I deserve to know what you know.”

“I don’t know what impact this information could have on the transfer, but I know the effect it has on me.”

“Something concerns you. About Graham? What happened?”

Hannibal silently applauds her performance. She sounds genuinely concerned. For Hannibal. If not him, then at least she seems concerned about the transfer.

“It would appear dear Will has not recovered from his…ordeal, psychologically speaking. He may not be competent to testify. He may be better now. The investigator is still looking into it.”

“I know that is distressing for you Hannibal. It is difficult to stand aside and watch, or learn that a patient cannot be helped. I tried to tell you.”

"You did. Is there anything else you wanted to talk about this evening?”

“No, I suppose not.” Du Maurier clears her throat. “Well, I imagine you’ll be receiving some more news very soon. And I hope it is news you can…accept.”

“As do I. I will apprise you of any other news as I receive it.”

“Good night, Hannibal.”

“Good night. Bedelia.”

Hannibal clicks off the phone and gazes at the setting sun. His garden is beautiful this time of day. And it smells glorious on this late summer afternoon. Hannibal is pleased with the call. He did not even have to lie. Du Maurier does not need to know that Roberta is his investigator or that what he told her was the state of affairs several months ago. Will was apparently in some kind of protective custody, but Roberta learned from her friend that one Jack Crawford pulled him out of it for some off the books operation. Officially, Will is still in custody, but Hannibal knows what Uncle Jack put him up to. Hannibal also knows that means Jack will be joining Will soon after he receives his invitation if he’s not already on a plane to Florence.

Will is once again caught between the FBI and Hannibal. It would seem history is bent on repeating itself. Hannibal hopes Will finds his truth in his inferno. Truth may yet provide a different outcome. For both of them. He lifts his wine glass, swirls it around and watches the dark crimson legs drip back down the glass. He makes a silent toast.

To the truth then, Will…and all its consequences.

Hannibal wonders how long it will take Du Maurier to hire her own investigator. He glances at the clock and decides that Luciano has worked out enough for the day. He will allow the twins to relax and settle down for the night. He has already prepared their meal for this evening, but it is still too early to take it down. He sniffs the air and revels in the aroma of his tomatoes on the vine and the scent of his peppers.

He walks back inside to finish the Jambalaya. He considers which musical accompaniment he should select. Something festive he thinks. Perhaps something he hasn't listened to in a while. Hannibal walks over to the tall antique armoire that he had converted to house his music collection here in Florence. Like so much of the furniture here, the refurbished armoire is reminiscent of the one he left behind in Baltimore. Hannibal has had to reproduce his collection from memory and every once in a while he remembers a missing selection.

But not this evening. He finds what he is looking for and queues it up before returning to the kitchen. As always these days, the associations with Will come almost automatically and Hannibal smiles as he slices the fresh Andouille sausage he purchased this afternoon from his favorite butcher. Circumstances being what they are, Hannibal can make do without his own for a while.

He hums softly to Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, a selection he had shared with Will over dinner, a paella from Andalusia, during one of those cold winter nights in Baltimore.

Chapter End Notes

My thanks to blktuana and joeymalfoy for inspiration. I hope the flavor is tasty.
I will post another chapter next weekend but I have company coming for Easter and my home is a crime scene or should be declared one. There will be a brief but necessary hiatus. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

> Will leaves his inferno, debriefs with Daniel, and receives Hannibal’s invitation. Du Maurier makes an appearance and Will gets an email from Zeller.
>
> “The Dottore sent me here to kill you.”
>
> “No, he didn’t.” Will says quietly, taking a step toward Luciano as Daniel’s eyes grow wider.
>
> “He didn’t?” Luciano hugs Daniel closer.
>
> “No. He sent you here to die.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 58

Will leaves his inferno, debriefs with Daniel, and receives Hannibal’s invitation. Du Maurier makes an appearance and Will gets an email from Zeller.

Roberto Ferri, *Angelo Caduto - Icarus*

I have my ticket…right here.

Will?

The stone and cement continue to glow and pulse until the ruined terraces of Fiesole appear beyond the smoke that clears from the shimmering panes of pink rosebuds and faded olive vines that creep along the vibrating walls of Baltimore State Hospital. Will rubs at his eyes and watches the cracks in the wall become fissures, splitting stone and cement asunder, the corridor pulses in time with the beating of his heart. Light flashes strobe like, and it seems to Will like seeing his world in quick frames of movement; disjointed images assault his retinas as darkness relentlessly interrupts the light leaving Will vaguely disoriented. The floor seems to move under his feet and he stumbles but does not fall. Something has hold of him.

Hands cradle his face in the darkness and thumbs smooth and warm move to caress his brow in languid strokes so comforting he could almost float away from this awful place but for the tether that binds him here, the umbilical cord drawing life from him like a fiery mangled womb sucking flesh and bone from a fetus conceived in wickedness. To leave it forgotten. Aborted. A mistake of nature.

You were supposed to leave…

The words are his, but it is Hannibal who speaks them and Will feels the curl of a wet tongue around an ear and moist breath in his hair and the tether draws him back into the furnace again. His skin prickles as talons graze across his stomach tearing at the scar that flushes angry red. Will becomes aware of the monstrous creature standing behind him; its great wings rustle softly as slick and feather laden talons grasp his naked shoulders. Its dark eyes gleam and shimmer as Will watches the walls crumble to dry and scorched rubble like the rest of this desolate place that is his inferno.

Its wings hold him fast and Will is once again standing within the inferno of his dreams, the taste of despair sour and thick upon his tongue, the scene of gnarled wretchedness as broken and empty as he is.

He just imagined he killed two people, indulging his instincts and enjoying the quiet sense of power that had filled him like a drug. The fight had been like a dance, nearly every movement of his adversaries anticipated, his own movements quick and lethal, and he had taken a primal delight in the ease with which his body had assumed a state of predatory awareness.

Natural. Superior. Deadly.

He had watched Hannibal reduce Chilton to a heap of breathless blood and bone at his feet as the monster growing inside had coiled deep within his bowels accompanied by a familiar shudder he now associates with…pleasure.

The regret remains. It stings. It reminds him of who he is…

Will peers out from the collar of feathers about his neck. The ruined landscape is as familiar to him as his home in Wolf Trap, as familiar as his adopted residence at Chandal Square and every bit as treacherous yet he is compelled to return to it, again and again and again.

I want to leave. Will says, trying to remember if he actually said the exit word aloud or if he thought it.

I don't want you to be here, Will.

I don't want me to be here either.

Then you have a choice. Still the uncommitted soul, with that ill band of angels mixed, undecided and…indifferent?

Will laughs bitterly as he gazes into the red rimmed eyes looking down at him, its wings frame a frightful and familiar canopy of malevolence over his head.

Still uncommitted, still here. He says twisting away from the suffocating plumes of black.

Will, the mirrors in your mind can reflect the best of yourself, not the worst of someone else.

Your definitions of best and worst are different than mine.

Best and worst. Good and evil. Ideals. Concepts.

Not everything is malleable. Certainly not the truth.

The truth is perhaps the most malleable of all concepts. And highly subjective. Like the truths you showed to me?

Will flinches and looks aside. He remembers another conversation in Hannibal's office, red and white curtains drawn, fire burning brightly in heated contrast to the chill of the words crackling crisply between them, two predators ensconced upon lustrous leather cushions trading secrets and delivering flat announcements of disaster.

I don't expect you to admit anything. You can't. But I prefer sins of omission to outright lies, Dr. Lecter. Don't lie to me.

Will you return the courtesy?

Will wriggles with the memory and the creature at his back clucks its tongue softly, a chiding sound that Will knows well.

Touched a nerve, have I? Hannibal's voice fills his head as talons sink into his stomach.

Will looks around at the ruined landscape of his scorched inferno and sees his steadfast companions remain. The gray wolf reclines at the foot of the boulder where winged Daniel watches from above his pearlescent wings raised in greeting as ash falls from the hazy clouds above. Will clicks his tongue against the sticky roof of his dry gritty mouth. He swallows and it feels like a lump of cold crumbling clay is caught there. He rubs his throat as he looks at Daniel and thinks of tumbling waterfalls, deep pools, and ocean… He can almost feel the cool tumble of waves tossing him about, unfettered upon the open sea, the scent of salt and brine so close…

Will. Can you hear me?

The cello from Bach's *Suite No. 2 in D Minor* hums close by and the notes echo in his head as goosebumps rise along his naked skin. He feels the weight of wings, his wings, shifting in the embrace of the creature at his back. His body twitches restlessly; every nerve anticipatory, arms and legs tingle not from the rush of the sea but as though stung by nettles streaming past him in a blur. He is running.

He is Hannibal's Adam stumbling blind through a garden of thorny spindles, sharp rocks and splintered bones that pierce his feet as Will runs, the wolf at his side, keeping pace. He halts at the edge of a precipice. He watches the shadow of the serpent tailed eagle descend over him. Its talons sink into shoulders as its body presses flush against his glossy wings pinning them to his back in a tight embrace.

The thing inside twists and Will can feel it uncoiling, its essence slipping through sinew and bone, stretching from belly to bowel and Will feels as though he will burst apart from the inside out. The feathered creature releases him and takes a step back. Will sinks to his knees to crouch upon the soil steeped in ash and cinder. His fingers find the scar as it begins to split open, blood as thick as oil drips through fingers that tremble now as much from the searing pain as the reopening of the memories that sear his mind. The scaly tail twitches along the dirt as the black eagle lowers itself to the ground, great black wings dip to drag along the rust colored dust. It levels its red rimmed eyes at him as its long and blackened tongue darts over its beak.

I wanted you to believe in the best of me, just as I believed in the best of you. You limit yourself to seeing only what you want to see in yourself.

The mirrors in my mind reflect the truth whether I want to see it or not.

When you turn the mirrors on yourself what do you see?

I know who I am.

You know who you were and you still mourn what has been lost. You've been reborn. Wasn't that the goal of my therapy?

You said you think about God when you think about killing. How can you think of God and not think of good and evil?

Because, good and evil has nothing to do with God. When churches collapse on worshipers is that an act of God? Is that evil?

God subcontracts the evil to Satan?

Typhoid and swans, Will, it all comes from the same place. Good and evil. Up…and down. Concepts to contemplate from your enlightened perspective.

The creature stretches a single talon and points to the ground where Will crouches cradling his wound. A fissure in the swollen earth opens belching smoke and Will's eyes burn with the hazy orange cloud that gathers at the precipice. The wound continues to weep and Will thinks it is his own blood that has infused the soil beneath in ruddy crimson. He sees the creature, the wolf and winged Daniel through the charred orange haze that reeks of blood, his mind a pyre of the corpses extinguished in the flames of his becoming.

He blinks the stinging smoke from his eyes and sees the ravenstag lying on the ground, its hooves scraping at the dry dirt, and suddenly he is once again prone upon the floor of Hannibal's kitchen, his shirt and face awash in blood, the stench of it at his nostrils, hands folded beneath his ravaged flesh. The ravenstag lifts its head to look back at Will, its great glassy eyes gaze into his and Will realizes it is this moment that sent him to his inferno.

It's your inferno, Will. You can leave any time you want. Hannibal's voice whispers. *I know why you won't leave.*

The smoke clears over the precipice and Will hears the thunderous crash of waves below, imagines a sea of red churning beneath as his inferno bleeds. Feathers ruffle against his cheek and he feels the prickle of sharp tines like antlers breaking along his spine. He knows if he reaches around to touch the spines, he will find the shafts of fledgling feathers erupting like razors along his flesh.

You tarry here because in here, I am with you.

Alone without each other. Will manages a smirk as his fingers claw at the soot and ash.

At least you punish both of us. You've condemned yourself and me…bearing a wound invited by deception and inflicted by pride.

Will lifts his eyes and sees a tent draped in banners of red and white, but the javelins, plumed helmets, and shields lean from hand hewn posts forgotten in the scene of tragedy that registers in Will's mind. Though the occupants are naked, there is no mistaking their identities.

Without even seeing his face, Will recognizes the tangle of soft brown curls and knows the figure lying on its side, pale and limp is the body of Patroclus and it is the flaxen haired Achilles who leans over the still form, stoically stitching the fatal wound delivered by Hector, a gash that mars the perfect flesh at his fingers. Armor, burnished and blood spattered sits untouched off to the side as the scent of frankincense filters through Will's nose.

Achilles was no surgeon but Will knows this Achilles would close the wounds of his beloved before sending him to his final resting place on a pyre of flame. Achilles ties off the last suture, blonde locks falling over his face as he rends the silk thread through his teeth. Fingers brush lightly over the pale and puckered flesh, no longer pink and flush with life. He picks up a sponge and dips it slowly drawing it over the wide lip of red and black kylix filled with perfumed water, squeezes once and commences bathing the body, scented sponge settling on face first. He wipes across the blue tinged lips and cannot help but glide his thumb tenderly over them. His eyes are dark and glittering beneath pale blonde lashes and his mouth twists in a grimace of pain even as he recoils from the chilled flesh that no longer responds to his touch.

I let you know me, see me. Achilles speaks, his words strangled in this throat. *The sight of you in my armor so convincing even I believed. But the gods saw the lie and took you from me.*

You wanted to be seen. Will says, his own chest tightening in sympathy.

By you. Only you. Ever…you.

Will reaches out his hand as though to still the hands that stubbornly caress the waxen cheeks already tinged with rigor. Achilles continues to gaze upon the peaceful figure, his anguish evident in the locking of jaws as fingers follow the arch of Patroclus' brow.

The ache burns slow in his chest and Will hates that it burns but he cannot deny the wrenching regret he feels as he empathizes with the distraught Achilles bending over the bruised and broken Patroclus. Will wipes impatiently at his eyes and tells himself he got too close, too close, too close…

Feathers sneak across his shoulders and Will turns to look into the face of the monster that haunts his inferno, the monster he condemned to keep him company.

Tears, Will? Does Adam miss the walks in the garden as well? I gave you a rare gift but you didn't want it.

Didn't I?

Another lie? I forgave you. Do you forgive me?

Acceptance…

Forgiveness…

An act of redemption.

Adam could walk again in the garden and Achilles could have his Patroclus.

The devil is not as dark as he appears.

Daniel's voice throbs in his head as his winged figure tentatively approaches, keeping his distance from the creature skulking in shadow hovering over Will. He holds out his hand for Will to grasp it from where he crouches in the filth and the dirt.

Do you see, Will? Don't you see the fear that keeps you here? All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream…

Will? Do you see me? I want you to count backwards…

With all my knowledge and intrusion… Hannibal's voice intones in his head as the odor of blood surges through his nostrils.

No…I know who I am.

Give me your ticket, Will. I'm right here…

Will hisses through teeth clenched in anguish, his body contorted, fingers wrapped around the weeping wound. Hannibal's words descend upon his ears tumbling in the same timbre and gentle tone as the words spoken in the salon, syllables slick with the warmth of whiskey, and fingers that slide seductive and soft along Will's bristled cheeks. Will watches the parched ground greedily soak up the blood that seeps from his wound through half lidded eyes.

I could never entirely predict you.

I know who I am.

I can feed the caterpillar, and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches, follows its own nature,

its own nature,

and is beyond me.

I know who I am.

I know who I am.

…backwards from ten. I'll count with you…

The serpent tailed creature looks down upon him through its red rimmed eyes as Will collapses upon the sullied soil, wings splayed uncomfortably beneath and belly up before the beast that bends down through the ash and smoke to smear its crimson stained lips across the wound and Will shivers at the searing heat as the wound is sealed once again. He reaches up a hand expecting the slick feathers to move between his fingers and feels the smooth skin of cheeks and chin instead. A thumb rubs gently at his lips as strong hands cradle his face and ruffle through the damp curls that stick to his head.

Hannibal?

Will?

Icarus didn't fall because he looked up; he fell because he looked down.

…seven…six…count with me, Will…

Is it hubris to refuse a gift from the gods?

Will shudders as the ground moves beneath him and he is falling, falling…counting and falling…

…three…two…one.

Daniel watches the pale blue eyes widen into focus as Will looks up at him through half lidded eyes. There is more blue than black and Daniel turns the heavy head he holds in his hands to the open window. The pupils contract in the sunlight and Will pulls his head away to shield his eyes.

"Where are you? What do you see?" Daniel says to the figure coiled the bed. He wonders which Will lies beside him wrapped in sweaty sheets and glistening with perspiration. Will has assumed the classic fetal position, arms hugging his chest and knees drawn up. Daniel imagines him sleeping like this as a child; he needs only his thumb in his mouth to complete the picture. It's a comfort pose, the mind subconsciously seeks protection in the place it felt most protected.

Or, the mind is subconsciously preparing for a rebirth. Daniel wonders what Will's take will be when he wakes up enough to notice.

Daniel touches the side of Will's neck and feels his pulse. It's steady. Will's fingers curl over his and Daniel braces, waiting to see what name Will calls out this time.

“I see you, Daniel. I see you.” Will says, voice thin, tired, but aware.

“How do you feel?” Daniel asks, letting go of him. He can feel the relief released by Will’s words. His neck and shoulders slowly begin to unwind from the vice that has kept them pinched for what seems like days.

He cannot begin to describe what he feels from Will. Daniel is torn between bolting from the room and from throwing his arms over Will’s shoulders. The need to be alone, separate from Will plucks at nerves already frayed like worn strings about to break upon the bow. He sits on the edge of the bed instead, and tries to ignore the pounding in his head and the soreness between his legs.

Will lets Daniel’s fingers slip away reluctantly. The room still pulses and shimmers and the hardwood glows beneath his feet. The need to feel substance and solidity is persistent, but Will settles for wrapping his fingers around the damp rumpled sheets that conceal his lower half. He realizes he is naked beneath the cotton and slowly stretches his legs as he glances up at Daniel. Will wonders how much of his hallucination he spent curled up like that. He remembers many nights in Wolf Trap waking from tortured dreams in a cold sweat and wrapping himself up in a blanket to lay the same way.

Will clicks his tongue against the roof his mouth. His entire mouth feels pasty. He notices Cara on the bed with him, curled up at his feet. The sight of her causes Will to gasp and then laugh aloud. He laughs to keep from crying, and he sighs willing the tears that well up to stop.

He feels like a complete mess, unraveled, just pull any string and he will come apart. He is not entirely certain he is not still dreaming. This bed and the touch of Daniel’s hand on his shoulder feel no more or less real than his hallucinations.

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

He shakes his head. Daniel asked him a question. At least Daniel isn’t sitting there naked with huge white wings.

“Shredded. I feel…shredded. Didn’t I have clothes on when we started?”

“Oh yeah. You peeled them off hours ago.”

Will takes in the wrinkled tee hanging off Daniel’s shoulder and the gym shorts gathered at his hips. These are not the same clothes Daniel had on earlier. These are clothes chosen in haste, pulled on in a hurry. Damp tufts of curls stick out over his head and, Will realizes what seems different about him.

“When did you shave?”

“About an hour or so into it. A little tactile reinforcement.”

Daniel bites at his lower lip, incredibly self-conscious all of a sudden. It shouldn’t take Will long to notice the other little changes their experience has inflicted over his body. Daniel has covered up as much as he could, but the abrasions on his face are impossible to hide. And there are the wounds Will cannot see. As his therapist, Daniel shouldn’t let him see, but as his friend, his… Daniel wonders what he is to Will, exactly.

The thought hangs in his mind, suspended like a balloon and Daniel decides to leave it there rather than burst it with anything so painful as the truth.

Will blinks as memories of the last several hours fill his head, associations click in his mind in numbing succession as images flood his consciousness. Daniel had played Hannibal for him. It hurts to be so aware of one's inclinations. He buries his head in his hands.

"Fuck. What don't you know about me?"

"I'll bet quite a lot. Look, we don't have to talk about this now. If you're okay, I'd like to take the dogs out. They've been really patient."

Will looks up at him and sees past the ruffled hair and the clean shaven face. Besides looking years younger, Daniel looks like he's been in a fight. And the only person who could have inflicted the cuts and bruises Will sees flaring from tanned skin is him. Daniel had played Will as well. A lump catches in Will's throat as he remembers and he wants to crawl under the sheets.

"Things got physical. I didn't just hallucinate, I was out of control?"

"Controlled violence. Necessary." The green eyes narrow, trying not to appear as wounded as Daniel surely feels. Will cringes inside. He hurt him, and deeply.

Daniel runs shaky fingers through his hair. He does not want to discuss all this right now. He's too raw from it, mentally and physically, and so is Will.

"You expected it?"

"Uh…no." Daniel almost laughs, "I had to um…improvise."

Will looks aside, shame erupts fresh and raw from deep within, he feels his face grow hot and the wound quivers at his touch, the remorse clawing from the inside out. His head feels like it could crack open any second. He flops over on the bed, pulls the sheets up and wonders what wounds Daniel's shorts and tee are hiding. The bruise across his cheekbone and the cut that swells along his lip are indication enough of what else lies beneath the camouflage of faded cotton and Nike sneakers.

Daniel is never going to let him touch him again, Will thinks. He doesn't blame him. He's selected himself for exclusion once again. Murderer. Monster. Stigmatized.

Daniel must have suspected what regressing him like this could mean, but had gone ahead anyway despite Will's warnings. He had wanted to see into Will and a part of Will had wanted him to. Will can understand that wanting. Despite the risk, Hannibal had wanted, needed to show him, too. But Daniel is not Hannibal. A concept Daniel likely appreciates all too well.

Will glances out the window at the setting sun. The sunlight had been drifting lazily through the kitchen windows when they started. Will's stomach grumbles as he remembers eating his psilocybin soaked breakfast. It would seem his body has taken longer to metabolize the drugs than Daniel had anticipated. His eyes fall on the nightstand and he smiles at the two bottles of water and the container of Excedrin he knows Daniel set out for him. Always thoughtful. Painfully so.

"Go ahead. Take the dogs out. I'll be right here…thinking."

Will wonders what Daniel sees when he looks at him now. He thinks he doesn't want to know.

"You remember everything, don't you?" Daniel asks.

"With a clarity that is sharp as a…knife."

Will winces and nods. He remembers all too well. His head feels thick and heavy, but the little darts of lights bouncing off the walls have disappeared and he feels more like himself. Whatever that is.

Daniel has folded his arms over his chest massaging tense elbows with his fingers. It's a defensive posture, involuntary but expressive. Will is not insensitive to Daniel's gift. A gift that has surely left him tied up in knots.

"Was all this worth it?" Will pauses, "The trip was incredible."

"Went pretty deep, I know." Daniel says, biting his lip at the unintended pun.

Will catches Daniel's eyes, ignores the phrasing, "But the cost…Daniel…"

"The cost was acceptable." Daniel words sound flat, even to him. He quickly smiles at Will and rubs his cheek.

As Will stares into his face, pale blue eyes searching Daniel's for any sign of reproach, Daniel feels the gush of affection, of gratitude welling in Will to mingle with the regret and shame that threaten to tumble through the meager shreds of resistance Daniel has left. Daniel cannot handle an emotional tide like that. It would rip him apart. He needs to get out of this room, just for a little while.

"That's not what I meant." Will says, tugging at Daniel's fingers.

The tug resonates. Daniel twists inside, but Will's lure catches in his heart and Daniel lets the line reel him in. He feels Will's hand contract around his fingers and he clasps his hand over Will's. He allows Will's head to lean against his hip for a moment. The dogs stir restlessly in the hallway, patience expended and bladders full. Daniel looks down at the damp curls pressing against his tee.

"You didn't break me, Will. I saw the monster and I am still here."

Du Maurier stares at her phone in disbelief as Clayton's voicemail message sounds in her ear for the third time. He should be home on a late Thursday afternoon kicking back with his dogs and Graham. She sighs and declines to leave a message. He will return her call eventually. He is circumspect about his practice although she acknowledges Graham has a way of creating his own particular brand of chaos.

Du Maurier hums softly to Pavarotti, *Nessun Dorma*, a favorite performance she never tires of listening to and somehow apropos as she looks over the rolling hills of the vineyard from her patio. She pours another glass of the crisp Bianco Tuscana and lifts it to her lips, savoring the aroma of citrus and delighting in the metallic finish that alights upon her tongue. She thinks she will continue to drink this vintage even after she has left Italy behind her. She will not miss Lydia but she will remember this view fondly and an order placed every now and then for this delicious wine will summon the best moments of her time here.

She has already selected another identity to replace Doctor Dumont. She thinks it time to replace her blonde tresses with a less provocative and less memorable shade of brown. Tinted contacts will hide the bright blue of her Nordic ancestry to blend in with new neighbors among the palette of pastels that await her in the south of France. And the wine. One must not forget one's passions.

She glances at the photos of the quaint cottage she has purchased in Provence, clicking on one image after another. She has missed France, although Florence has not been without its charms, at least until recently.

Her conversation with Hannibal continues to occupy her thoughts but she can find no reason to suspect anything. His candor seems genuine. Of course, the best lies are couched in truths and Hannibal is the master of weaving even the darkest of lies into a tapestry of light. He may not know Graham is here, but if his investigator is any good, he soon will. He will also know that Crawford sent him here. Hannibal will invariably consider Crawford's intentions and more to the point, Crawford's resources. Including her.

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford.

Except perhaps desperation. Agent Crawford is very desperate. He must be if he released the damaged and demented Graham from whatever protective custody in whatever psychiatric facility he was in to hunt Hannibal. And Graham must have been under psychiatric care. Crawford must have pulled him out of therapy and Graham had been struggling in Florence, enough to seek out Clayton.

She doubts Crawford mentioned anything to Graham about his arrangement with her. The seeds of doubt she had planted in Crawford's mind had germinated quietly, and had grown into a forest of uncertainty where Graham was concerned. As Hannibal was fond of doing himself, she had provided Crawford with tantalizing tidbits of misgiving and Graham had fed the beast of suspicion within Crawford with his own misguided actions.

Both Hannibal and Graham were vulnerable in their loneliness. Hannibal had completely lost his perspective with Graham because of it. Graham has apparently lost his mind over it. And Du Maurier can continue to exploit it in both of them to her advantage. Crawford is aware, too. She remembers her conversation with the grim faced Crawford as he had walked her out of FBI headquarters.

Whatever your situation with Doctor Lecter…I believe you want to be free of him, eventually.

I would like to be free of all of you. My entire life has been uprooted.

Understood. I'm letting you go with the understanding…

And the written agreement…

And the agreement, that should Doctor Lecter contact you or resume an association with you in any way, you will contact me, and only me.

In exchange for complete immunity from prosecution.

As complete as I can manage. I need to keep my options…open. I agree that Will might be more compromised than I realized, but I'm not happy about letting you walk out of here free.

You let Will Graham walk free.

I can keep an eye on Will.

For now.

Will is…in a bad place right now, and I put him there. I have to keep an eye on him. Will is my friend.

Will Graham is not your friend…

Distrust had bloomed and chaos had ensued. Chaos is a milieu in which Hannibal excels and thrives. Graham had barely survived the terrible tantrum he had wrought. Jack Crawford had not fared much better. She decides Crawford would keep his indiscretions close to the vest. If he has pulled Graham out of protective custody, he likely did so without proper authorization as he had done when he had released her. Du Maurier imagines Crawford received plenty of flack for that.

Graham must be walking around a marked man. He has to know that if things go badly, Crawford will deny getting him out. Graham will be considered an escaped mental patient. He is the most expendable player on the board, except where Hannibal is concerned. Crawford knows Graham is the bait that will entice Hannibal like nothing else. Crawford is fishing. With two rods this time.

She doubts any agreement they made, in writing or not, would be honored should they catch Hannibal. It does not matter. She will set her trap and Hannibal's code will be hers. Jack Crawford will never see her again.

Du Maurier glances at the counter and thinks she should prepare some lunch. She picks up the phone instead, deciding to try Clayton once more when it vibrates in her hand. It's Clayton.

"Hello." Du Maurier breathes into the phone after allowing a few seconds to pass.

"Doctor…Cesca. You rang?" Clayton's tone is polite but clipped.

"Daniel…I know I called several times, but it is Thursday and I haven't heard from you about Saturday."

"Right. About that…Hey! No, No… over here…good girl. Sorry, I'm out with my dogs right now and uh…Oh c'mon…really? Just a minute…"

Du Maurier rolls her eyes and sighs. She drinks half a glass before Clayton is back on the phone with her.

"I think it's important that Lydia's therapy take place in a more conducive environment."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning not at the estate. With her family present. You concur don't you?"

"Well, Signor Fiore might not be open to that change of venue. Where would you want to conduct the therapy?"

"I could meet you both at the park, near the Teatro Romano here in Fiesole."

“Well, I could talk to Signor Fiore about the change of plans. He might agree for next time, but he expects his daughter to remain on the estate with the dogs you bring at least this weekend.”

Du Maurier examines her nails and wonders why Clayton is being so insistent on another location. She thinks perhaps their last encounter might have affected him more adversely than she had thought. He should be thinking about the obscene amount of money he is receiving to treat the wine czar’s daughter on location.

“Well, if I call today, I can arrange for the dogs. I will call if we are agreed Lydia comes to the park. If Fiore disagrees he can stick his wallet up his ass. So, what do you think?”

“I think you are putting me in a very delicate situation. May I ask what has prompted your…attitude?”

“We want what is best for Lydia, yes?”

“Always.”

“Then, let me be the bad guy. You are simply the messenger. I can’t treat her there. Not effectively. I appreciate you aren’t exactly in a position of influence with her father, but I am. I haven’t deposited the check. I’ll tear it up before I step foot on the estate again. Are we clear?”

Du Maurier hears him loud and clear. Clayton does not want to subject himself to her influence except on neutral ground. He has had time to reflect on his experience at her bungalow and the reflection was not favorable. She must repair their fractured relationship and quickly. He sounds particularly testy and Du Maurier decides to soothe his ruffled feathers.

“I understand your thinking and I agree with you; however your method is rather abrupt. Still, Lydia has been looking forward to her session with you all week. Fiore hates to disappoint her. I think I can persuade him to see the value of social interaction away from one’s comfort zone without offending him in the process, which I’m sure that given your current mood would be impossible for you.”

Du Maurier waits, swirls her wine around the glass. She hears Clayton sigh and imagines him rubbing slender fingers along that luscious mouth of his as he considers his options. He may mean what he says at the moment, but he doesn’t want to make an enemy of Fiore and by extension negatively impact his highly reputable practice. She considers he may be blowing off steam about something else. It would not surprise her if Clayton found Graham exasperating. Everyone else does.

“Thank you for seeing it that way. And thanks for being so gracious. I’m…I’ve had a rough day and I probably shouldn’t have called you until later. I’m sorry for the…abruptness.”

“Apology accepted. Shall I call you later? Or will that be too late to arrange for the dogs?”

“I’ll arrange for the dogs after I hang up. I can always cancel, but I’m hopeful you can work some magic on the Signor.”

“Well, take care then and I’ll phone tomorrow.”

“Okay. Ciao.”

Du Maurier rises from her chair and thinks Saturday at the park is not such a bad idea. The decorators will be coming Saturday to replace the rug. She glances at the large stain on the white carpet and takes another gulp of wine. She smiles as she thinks seeing Clayton under any circumstances will be rewarding. If she is to discern any influence or interference by Hannibal, she must remain cordial with him.

The thought occurs to her that he might bring Graham along to the session. The park he chose is near his home. She cannot think of any reason for him to invite Graham, but stranger things have happened. It would be her bad luck to run into Graham. She has not been impervious to setbacks of late. Du Maurier does not believe in luck. More precisely, she does not believe in leaving her life to Fate. Fate and Hannibal make bad bedfellows. She decides she can alleviate her problem when she talks with Clayton again on Friday.

Daniel ambles back to his house with the dogs. He takes a meandering route; he's in no hurry. He thinks he should get a better grip on himself before he returns home if his phone call with Dumont was any indication. He had simply snapped when he checked his messages. The residual fall out from Will is affecting him still and while he had thought to call and cancel his Friday appointments earlier – the reason he had pulled out his phone in first place – he now thinks he should go in if just to distance himself from Will. He needs to feel normal. He needs some semblance of his old routines.

He needs to feel grounded and he does not feel grounded at the moment. He can't function like this and he certainly cannot provide Will with the anchor he requires. Will needs more than an anchor, but Daniel can only provide so much.

He has narrowed down the lies he can offer to Maria to explain his appearance tomorrow to a handful. None of them really sound convincing, but the lie doesn't have to be convincing. The lie is a polite way of informing Maria he doesn't want to talk about it…ever. She can assume whatever she likes.

Daniel is more concerned about what the drug induced descent into hell has introduced into Will's shattered psyche. Giving anyone hallucinogens even under controlled conditions is risky. Giving them to Will was not only crazy, but the experience has been nerve wracking for him and has completely unhinged Will. The unhinging was necessary.

Will had to unlock the forts he has erected around Lecter and soon. Daniel knows that meeting up with Hannibal again is imminent. This business with the Paolini is about to explode and Will cannot have epiphanies in front of Lecter. Lecter has taken advantage of Will enough already. Will needs a fighting chance to deal with him.

Daniel knows which way the wind blows. Will loves Hannibal. He will not kill him. From what Daniel understands of his hallucinations at BSHCI, he is not going help lock him up either. What Will has to decide, what Will has really been trying to decide all along, and Daniel had not understood himself until now, is whether or not he wants to resume a relationship with Hannibal. And, if Hannibal wants the same thing.

Will may or may not be aware this is what he needs to decide. Will can only admit to himself that he wants to know Lecter's state of mind. Daniel thinks Will does not want to deal with why at the moment. The fact that he does not want to deal with the why should set off some alarms. Perhaps the alarms are going off now. If Will wants to get out of his inferno, Daniel thinks he can be his Virgil. But Will has to allow the devil to help him, too.

When Will is with Jack Crawford he empathizes that he shouldn't want the thing he wants. Even when he is with Daniel, Will empathizes. But when Will is alone, left to his own feelings in isolation, he is torn. Wracked with guilt for wanting, paralyzed with regret over what has been lost, and seething with anger over the lives lost in his pursuit. And yet, it all boils down to whether or not Will can forgive all of that.

The ache in his chest twinges sharply as he walks behind Bella and Cara who tug at their leashes now that the house has appeared below them. Daniel knows that even if Will finds it in himself to walk away from Hannibal, he will not stay. The goal of his therapy with Will was to help him muddle through that amazing mind of his so he could come to grips with his feelings. His feelings, his wants, his needs. Not anyone else's.

Daniel knows what he wants. And he knows he cannot have it. Acceptance hurts.

Daniel also knows that if Hannibal has decided he wants Will back; he will not let Will go. Hannibal will be ruthless in his possessiveness. Daniel is not unaware of the danger his association with Will brings. Allowing Will to stay at his house is an invitation in itself. He must be insane to remain in Fiesole, in Italy for that matter. He doubts Hannibal would thank him for taking over as Will's psychiatrist. Daniel thinks perhaps he might have a future in couples' therapy.

Daniel sighs. Will is a really bad influence on him. His humor is clearly a casualty.

The thought that he is competing with a narcissistic serial killer for Will's affections should be funny, but it isn't. Daniel thinks he would probably have to kill someone for Will to even consider running away with him, anyway. Daniel berates himself. He's tired and this tasteless humor is a coping mechanism. He should just go to bed but he knows he can't. Not yet.

Daniel rubs at his eyes and buries the other ridiculous thoughts running around his head. He needs to mentally prepare for a debriefing with Will. They won't accomplish much except to touch the tip of the iceberg, but they should discuss a few things while the experience is still fresh for both of them. Daniel grunts as he walks, very fresh indeed.

Daniel decides to keep their discussion content related rather than delve into the emotional aspect of the therapy. Daniel doesn't trust himself to keep his emotions in check should they discuss Will's intentions. Daniel's emotions are rubbed raw like the rest of him. If Will wants to talk about his feelings, Daniel will listen, but he doubts Will has the energy for that discussion, either.

As he reaches the driveway up to his house he sees the lights are on. Will is up and about, hopefully eating something and rehydrating after going all day without either sustenance or water. Bella and Cara paw at the front porch and Daniel opens the door wide to let them inside.

He finds Will seated in the kitchen, showered and dressed simply in a tee and drawstring sweatpants as he sits sipping iced tea that smells vaguely of whiskey. Habits. Daniel pulls out his phone to call the kennel. The dogs are for Lydia he tells himself, not Dumont.

Will shoves the last dish in the dishwasher and closes the door, depresses the button and listens to the water pump through the old pipes. He turns to Daniel who lifts his head to greet Will's inquisitive stare.

“You’re about to say something, so say it.” Daniel says.

“You can’t be serious about going in to your office tomorrow. You…look like hell.”

“Funny, feels like I’ve been there, too. I need to go in, Will. I need some space and you need space, to reflect.”

They have been talking for about an hour and the debriefing has been productive, but Daniel knows Will is exhausted and so is he. He knows Will has some trepidation about falling asleep and is not prepared to dream again so soon, but Daniel thinks his mind has reached a saturation point of sorts and might allow him a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Daniel is willing to suggest that Will imagine he is falling asleep in Hannibal’s bed in Baltimore, but thinks that might not go over very well. At least not coming from him. For all Daniel knows, that is exactly what Will plans on doing. Will likely wonders if the medicine is worth the cure.

“You’ve given me plenty to reflect on.” Will says as he leans against the counter.

“Well, we’ve tried to focus on the obvious stuff. More will come up. I didn’t expect to decipher your entire mindscape this evening. The drugs allowed you take an inner journey and remember it.”

“I doubt I will ever forget it.”

“Still no idea who the messenger is supposed to represent?”

“No, not yet. But it’s probably important that the messenger is you. And he seems to have only two messages.”

“But knowing what he represents would shed light on the messages.” Daniel says.

Daniel takes up next to Will at the counter, leans the small of his back against the Formica and stretches his legs out in front a ways. Will looks aside at him and smiles. Daniel has kept his distance from Will for most of their discussion and it feels good to have him close.

“Telling you over and over that the devil is not as dark as he appears is easy enough and it’s not surprising that my counterpart says that to you.”

“You’ve been trying to get me to see the good in Hannibal from the beginning.”

“And do you?”

“I’m trying.”

“It’s difficult for you because you empathize so closely with him. To see good in him is to see it in yourself and you are enjoying punishing yourself far too much to see that.”

“Don’t mince your words, Daniel. These concepts of good and evil are at the heart of everything.”

“Because you have made them the issue. For all your empathy Will, you still argue with the Hannibal in your mind with your mindset. He can’t give you the answers you want because you don’t want to hear them.”

“What is it I don’t want to hear, Daniel?”

“Your choice in the inferno is not about choosing good or evil. It’s about choosing how to look at good and evil. Hannibal wants you to look at the concepts as he does, as he believes god would if he believed there was a god.”

“Typhus and swans.”

“It’s about becoming, Will. Transformation. Killing has changed the way you think. Ideals and concepts are no longer absolutes for you. They are subjective, situational, and malleable.”

“Do you believe that?” Will says, incredulous.

“It does not matter what I believe. If you want to get out, you have to decide what you believe. He says dreams prepare us for waking life. Nothing is more true for you.”

“You recognized the prints I mentioned from his house, from the salon.”

“I looked them up while you were…calmly hallucinating. Laptops are a wonderful thing.”

“The pictures have to do with Dante’s Inferno, don’t they?”

“All but one. Hannibal does have a dry sense of humor. But his pathology betrays a deep rejection of Christian values. He mocks them. Probably goes hand in hand with his narcissism. And his predilection to think in classical terms. He sees himself as a force of nature.”

“A god. A god to rival god. Or close to one. He’s not immortal.”

Will wonders what forces nurtured Hannibal’s epic imagination and associations. Will thinks of a lonely child in an orphanage secretly reading from books likely banned under Soviet occupation, but books he had cherished while still wrapped in the cocoon of family.

“Seems to me he is concerned with his legacy. He is complicated, Will. It’s going to take some time to sort all this out. But that painting of Leda and the Swan in his dining room is the place to start.”

Will shifts against the counter. He knows his relationship with Hannibal is mirrored in that painting. How Hannibal has interpreted Boucher’s explicitly sexual rendering of the mythic encounter and applied it to himself and Will is crucial to understanding Hannibal’s epic universe.

“He said as much.”

“You said as much. Will, remember that everyone and everything in your hallucinations and dreams represents a part of you. The parts are fractured because you fractured them. You fractured them on Hannibal’s kitchen floor. You understand that, right?”

Will nods and tries not to grind his teeth. Why does Daniel seem to see more clearly than he does? His mind is fractured he reminds himself, fractured but not broken. He closes his eyes and imagines shattered tea cups strewn along Hannibal’s floor. He returns his attention to Daniel.

“Let’s leave Leda and her swan for the moment, but remember this, Will. In some versions of the myth, Zeus rapes Nemesis, Leda becomes that goddess.”

Will stands up straight. Associations stir, thoughts and images churn as though released anew, like a plow freeing frozen soil trapped too long in winter's slumber.

"As for the other paintings, the ones from the Inferno…" Daniel pauses, "You okay?"

"Just thinking." Will smiles. "Go ahead. It all fits together somehow."

"Dante's ninth circle has four rounds represented by various sinners. Those sinners are depicted in Hannibal's prints. He even arranged them in a circle. Did he arrange them like that after meeting you, or were they always like that?"

"I never saw them arranged any other way, so I can't answer that."

"Interesting. I was wondering if he has always thought this way or if meeting you caused him to think this way."

"Guess I'll have to ask him."

"Among other things, I'm sure. Anyway…Antenor, the Maccabaeus sons, Cain and Abel, and of course Judas are guilty of personal treachery, in essence…hubris. Sins against God, or the gods. That's where you are. In your mind because you can think like Hannibal, you have condemned yourself for committing hubris against Hannibal."

"I'm with you so far. Those four represent the inner circles of the ninth circle, reserved for the most egregious of offenses. The ninth circle is also where the devil lives. Of course I would condemn myself to the part of hell where I could be close to…the object of my afflictions."

"And the object of your afflictions is trying to show you the way out. Did you recognize the print in the center?"

"Hogarth, he said. A mythical scene? I remember seeing creatures in armor and a naked woman…a goddess?"

"Personifications. The figures are Satan, Death, and Sin. The naked woman is Sin, of course."

"Adam's temptress." Will says.

"Not just Adam. Eve's sin is the sin that preceded all others. It would be Eve's sin that gave birth to the concept of sin. Sin and Death are Satan's constant companions."

"What is the painting a scene from? Not the inferno?"

"Milton's *Paradise Lost.* Do you know it?"

Associations come quickly once again and understanding unfolds like the dawn. Hannibal does have a twisted sense of humor. Too bad the joke is on Will.

"Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." Will says. "Milton's Satan would appeal to Hannibal. He is beautiful. A fallen angel who led a rebellion in heaven. He is classically tragic, almost Homeric."

"And the perfect literary personification of mockery to Dante's self-important and some would argue narcissistic Divine Comedy."

“Dante’s nemesis.”

“Milton’s intent was to explain God’s thinking. Dante’s intent was to explain his own actions, to mitigate his exile from Florence.”

“You’re right. Hannibal is very complicated.” Will bites along his lower lip and sucks thoughtfully for a moment. “The way out of my inferno is to mock God. To reject tradition and accept the notion I am beholden to no values other than my own.”

“To celebrate and revel in your…exclusion. With him.”

“And the swan?”

“A puzzle for another day. Sleep on it, see what happens. I have got to go to bed. I am a walking dead man.”

Will laughs softly. “I’ll join you. If that’s okay.”

“As long as it’s just the two of us.” Daniel says with a straight face.

Will sits at Daniel’s laptop typing phrases into library searches. He still can’t find the source for the eagle’s reference to the winged Daniel of his dreams, no matter how he phrases his search. He’s not even sure if it is from some literary work or it is simply a clue from deep within his memories delivered in a fragment by a fragment of his imagination.

On gliding wings he takes up his mask.

Will shrugs and decides to check his email. He is surprised to find an email from Zeller. Jack did tell him to expect follow up information on the investigation into the Paolini twins’ disappearance and the footage from the da Vinci airport. He clicks and his fingers tremble slightly with dread and hopeful anticipation.

Will,

Footage revealed license plate number of rental. Verified Paolini rentals from same company for last six months. Nothing remarkable. Baggage in the trunk contained personal items and evidence of lots of shopping in Paris. No information on Lecter. Face recognition on Luciano was positive, but no frames of their assailant facing cameras. Sorry. Kind of a bust. One other thing. There was a number of sex toys and lingerie in the luggage. And some kinky photos of the twins. Were you aware they were involved, with each other?

P is all over J and V is back in play. Thought you should know. Hope all is well.

Zee

Will scratches his chin as he puzzles over Zeller’s message. He had sent it from his own email account, preferring to keep the FBI at bay. His emails could always be found or tracked, but only if Zeller gave them cause. There was nothing incriminating in the message, but Zeller had decided not to contact him through official channels.

Will can imagine Purnell had not been pleased with all the sexual innuendo. He can picture her lips tightening in disgust, curling in the same contemptuous snarl she had bestowed upon him. Will sniffs and thinks she should get out of her office more often. Then again, maybe she doth protest too much.

Mason must have complained about being ignored by Jack. Jack had either received a nasty phone call from Purnell mid-flight, or had been stopped at the airport before leaving for Florence. If Mason had called Purnell, Purnell would know that Jack had pulled him out of protective custody. That could mean Jack is arriving with company. Or rather, escorts for him.

Will thinks he should contact Jack, but he's not sure what the best way is to do that. Mason might have dug up some information on his own and had passed it along to Jack. Maybe Jack had no choice but to read Mason in on what he was doing in exchange for the information. Will grits his teeth. Jack is holding out on him, again. How fleeting their happy bonding of the other day. Will hits reply on the email.

Zee,

All would be better if I knew wtf is going on. Any thoughts? Where's Jack? And…thanks.

W

He hits send and logs out. His coffee is cold and Will looks around the living room as he fidgets in the chair. He needs to occupy his mind and his body. He can't sit here all day. He knows what sitting still and zoning out will invite.

Will drags the lawn mower out of the garage and wheels up to the backyard. He figures he should do some work around the house. The yard has been the victim of neglect all week, and the week before. Will has robbed Daniel of his routines and the least he can do is take up the slack.

Besides, Will thinks sweating off whatever remains of the drugs in his system can't hurt. He glances at the dogs sniffing around the yard. Their sniffing reminds him of the wolf in his dreams, always alert, always searching for the viper lurking among the rubble of ruined terraces. He wonders what part of him the viper represents. It seems to Will that the viper is connected to the serpent tailed eagle.

The eagle's tail had become a viper, embattled with the elusive viper of his inferno. Will thinks of all the creatures in his inferno, the viper is the one creature that does not engage with him. It also seems the other creatures are keeping him from the viper. They sit upon their rocks and wait for the viper. Will thinks maybe he is letting the other creatures act while he observes. Then again, the dreamer is often the observer in the dream.

Will shakes the hair out of his eyes and wipes at his face with his shirt. Only ten thirty and the humidity hangs heavy and thick. He thinks of Daniel preparing for work this morning. Will had caught him staring at himself in the bathroom mirror razor in hand contemplating whether or not to tidy up or let the scruff grow back.

The cut on his lip had scabbed over and the bruise along his cheek had certainly not gotten any smaller during the night. Will had tugged on his boxers after they had gotten into bed wanting to see the damage he had inflicted. Daniel had eventually relented his expression somber as he had stared at the ceiling while Will has satisfied his curiosity. Will had not needed to say anything. Daniel already knew how he felt. He had turned to his side, facing away from Will not in rejection, but in invitation. Will had taken up his usual place in their bed, forehead pressed between Daniel's shoulder blades.

They had awakened in the same position and Will had actually slept. Will isn't sure if that indicates progress of if he was simply too fatigued to dream. Will's demon had also been sated and that too could have contributed to his restful slumber. Regardless, waking had been a pleasant experience this morning.

As Will pours gasoline into the mower he thinks he will concentrate on the identity of his winged messenger while he cuts the grass. The creature had quoted from something and Will is determined to remember what it is. If the creature is a fractured part of him, then the answer is in his head somewhere.

On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Masks hide identities. Greek tragedies employ masks. Gods and mortals exchange identities. Patroclus exchanged identities with Achilles.

Hiding and revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics.

Zeus transformed himself all the time. Leda became Nemesis. Hannibal wears a mask. And Will himself has been transformed. On whose wings does Daniel glide?

Hannibal sits beside the blindfolded Luciano as he drives toward Florence, and Fiesole. Luciano wears the blindfold for security reasons. It would be most unfortunate if Luciano were to disclose his whereabouts for the last several days to Will. He could tell Will approximately how many minutes it took to travel from one place to another, but Hannibal doubts Luciano will do that. Luciano will find himself suddenly deposited in Fiesole, not knowing from which direction he came. He will never leave Fiesole…alive.

Luciano has been raised to be hunter, not prey. He does not have the capacity to entertain the possibility of reversing those roles. He has concepts of family and loyalty. Those are the concepts Hannibal has relied upon to get him here.

Lucia is sedated back in the guest room, restraints about her legs, torso, and remaining arm. Hannibal doubts she will ever be awake again. Even if Luciano somehow manages to successfully complete his task, the porcine beauty will join her brother soon enough.

Luciano's life is forfeit already. Should Luciano kill Will, highly unlikely but possible, Hannibal will see to it that barely a breath escapes before Luciano joins Will in death. Hannibal is certain Luciano will not survive the encounter. Will has likely already considered how he will kill Luciano. Hannibal is forcing him to do it a little sooner.

Clayton and his dogs pose a challenge. Luciano has been instructed to kill only Will. Hannibal needs Clayton to find out what Du Maurier is up to. Hannibal did not save his live to give it to Luciano.

He is to leave the dogs alone. It is not Hannibal's intent to cause distress; the encounter is meant to inspire. Out of Luciano's destruction will come creation. And every creative act has its destructive consequence. Will requires a little reminder on the nature of things as they truly are. After this evening, Will can longer wrap himself up in Clayton's protective cocoon of field theory and Gestalt exercises.

Hannibal will be applying his own therapy. Will's responses are deeply ingrained, his conditioning is complete and behaviorism trumps field theory. In Hannibal's field theory, Will will most certainly be in touch with his feelings and habits in the here and now, the residue of the past will be smeared all over his fingers. Hannibal sighs with the pleasure rippling through him at the thought of Will's fingers at Luciano's throat.

Hannibal did not witness Will taking on Tier at his home in Wolf Trap that night. He had been pleased Will had brought the young man's broken body to his home, had been pleased at the bloodied evidence of primal superiority lying on his dining room table, had been especially amused that Will had placed Tier's body *on the table.* But seeing Will kill with his bare hands is a pleasure Hannibal has been looking forward to and he will not be robbed of it this evening.

He turns to the quiet Luciano. Hannibal decides it is not wise to allow Luciano to sit for long stretches without proper stimulation and conversation. He should not be left to think on his own for too long.

"Another twenty minutes, Luciano, we are almost there."

"This is not your car. At least it's not the same car as before. The one you drove to the airport."

Luciano is comfortable enough to talk with Lecter. Luciano has felt good the last couple days. Lifting weights and running agrees with him, makes him feel in control. His arms swell with strength and the wiry Graham will have no chance of winning a fight. Luciano will run him over like a locomotive. But the difference of vehicles has set Luciano to wondering what else this doctor is up to.

"No, it isn't. This vehicle is expendable, the other was not. Does that satisfy you?"

"Okay."

Luciano shrugs and rolls his shoulders into the back of the seat. He flexes and twists, expending excess nervous energy in anticipation of slitting Graham's throat.

Hannibal understands Luciano is nervous. His mind will focus on any detail that seems inexplicable. He is a creature of routines and a different car presents a different routine. He would obsess on the reason for the change to the distraction of his task. Hannibal decides to go over his instructions with Luciano again. They are simple so Luciano does not have to think too much. If he follows them, there should be minimal disruption.

"When I let you out, what are you going to do, Luciano?"

"Ima gonna find the psychiatrist Graham lives with who should be walking his dogs. Ima gonna follow him to his house and make him put the dogs away so they don't attack me. Then Ima gonna have the dottore lead me in the house to Graham."

"Very good. You let the doctor go into the house before you. Let him call for Graham. You wait for Graham to come to you.

"He'll alert Graham. I lose the uh…surprise." Luciano says.

"I want him alive. If you struggle with the doctor, you still lose the surprise. It is doubtful you will surprise Mr. Graham much. He is former FBI, Luciano."

"But, if I have the doctor he will be upset and I can use that."

"You will not upset Mr. Graham. There is a reason Mr. Verger wants him dead."

"You know what the reason is."

"I know Mr. Graham…intimately. Don't let those large soulful eyes fool you, Luciano. Use the dogs to control the doctor. Use the doctor to get in the door. The doctor will be incapacitated with fear."

"If you say so. What about Graham's gun?"

"He likely won't be wearing it around the house. He feels safe there. He won't go for it because he will recognize you and will not want to bring the police into it. He will want to deal with you… quietly. That is why you are taking a knife with you. You prefer knives, don't you?"

"Much more intimate." Luciano agrees.

Hannibal can see Luciano is warming to the idea of killing. It is his nature after all. But Luciano is prideful and he will want to dramatize his encounter with Will. He will invariably offer Will information Will should not have about him. Not yet.

"Luciano, it is important that you do not say too much to Mr. Graham. Before you kill him."

"Why not? Dead men tell no tales." Luciano smiles beneath his blindfold at his literary acumen.

"Because you do not want him to engage you in conversation. He will try to distract you. You need to kill quickly. Do you understand?"

"I understand. *Merda*! It is not so hard to kill a man."

"Certainly not one as motivated as you are. I'm sure you are poetry in motion, Luciano." Hannibal says as he takes the exit to Fiesole that bypasses Florence.

Clayton should be walking his dogs soon. Will sometimes walks with him, and in that case, Luciano will have to be trusted follow both of them back to Clayton's house and let the dogs out himself. Either way, Will will deal with Luciano. He will protect what is his. Nothing should happen to Clayton. As soon as Will sees Luciano, he will know why Luciano is there and who sent him. Hannibal hopes Will appreciates the irony. Sometimes the best laid plans…

Daniel turns away from the crumbling upper level of the Teatro Romano barely visible at the top of the hill to head back home. He walked the dogs a little longer than usual this evening to choose a site for Lydia's therapy. Dumont had called him at the office pleased to announce Signor Fiore had agreed to send a limo to the Archaeological Museum Saturday afternoon. He even promised a case of wine.

Daniel understands the gesture. Fiore feels the need to be extravagant in his graciousness to remind Daniel of who is really in charge. In Fiore's universe, anyway. Daniel will accept the wine and everybody will be content they are one in charge. Daniel thinks that he thinks too much.

He certainly spends way too much time in other people's universes. This evening he gets to share in Will's, at least in a small way. Will surprised him with dinner plans, a first for him since moving in. Daniel suspects it is Will's way of easing his guilt. Daniel understands he needs to do something to assuage the regret he feels for the injuries he inflicted despite Daniel assuring him that all of it had been with his consent, though perhaps not blessing. He had finally chided Will for requiring a hallucinogenic assault to get him to cut the grass.

The look on Will's face had been worth the price of admission as they say. For dinner, Will had actually made his own gumbo and even took the time to bake a loaf of French bread to go with it. Daniel figures he called out for the groceries, because Daniel knows he doesn't have the ingredients sitting around his kitchen. He wonders if Will charged the FBI for the shrimp, okra, and bottle of single malt Glenlivet whiskey.

The smell of the gumbo simmering on the stove as Daniel had left the house with dogs had been overpowering. The smell of the bread fresh from the oven had filled the entire house. Daniel's stomach rumbles now and he hurries the dogs along, yelling endearments at them as they sniff their way down another hill.

After the day he had at the office, Daniel is more than ready for a quiet and uneventful Friday evening. The dogs pause as they arrive at Via Fra Giovanni Angelico, the winding street that leads to his house. Daniel waits as they sniff the air and begin to cautiously walk toward home.

Luciano stoops to hide behind the stone wall across the street from Dottore Clayton and his dogs. He thinks to approach the dottore just as he steps on his driveway. The dottore looks a lot like Graham. Maybe younger, hard to tell. He has a soft face, like a little boy. He seems athletic, but Luciano knows that being fit will not matter. This dottore is no fighter. He is a professional, an educated type who has never raised a fist, let alone a knife.

Luciano waits until he sees the dogs turn to run across a yard he thinks must be Clayton's front yard. The smell of fresh cut grass fills the air and Luciano can see the garage on the lower terrace is open as is the front door. Through the glass Luciano can see into the living room and kitchen where another figure paces the floor with a dishtowel. Graham.

"Hey…" Luciano calls out, "*Mi scuse, Mi scuse…"*

"Posso aiutarla?" Daniel says, looking Luciano over.

He wonders what this guy needs besides directions. He is clearly not from around the neighborhood. Daniel thinks it a little late for a wandering tourist. He thinks perhaps he's drunk, separated from his group. It happens.

Luciano takes a step closer, bends down to pet the inquisitive dogs sniffing at his trousers. When he straightens back up he is holding his knife and he flashes it at Daniel.

Daniel freezes. He thinks he is about to be mugged and he has no wallet or even any identification on him. He thinks Will is right inside. He glances toward the house but Will is nowhere in sight.

"You take the dogs to the garage, eh? Nice dogs. We put the dogs in there, okay?"

Daniel nods and walks the confused Bella and Cara to the garage. *Where is Will?* Daniel feels the press of the knife against his throat as he leads both dogs in the garage, drops the leashes, and closes the door on them. He looks to the man at his side holding the knife and decides he would have a tough time taking him if he didn't have a knife. The young man is broad and stout, barrel chested with arms like pistons. And he has a knife to Daniel's throat.

"Now, we walk up to the house. Front door."

"Who are you?" Daniel manages.

"Door."

Daniel receives a sharp nudge and proceeds to walk up the trail of flagstone to his front porch. He opens the door slowly and looks around. He hears Will in the kitchen. He thinks he might piss himself. He can't think of anything but the coldness of the metal at his throat.

"Call to him." Luciano breathes into his ear.

Luciano braces his body against the young doctor's lithe frame. Graham will not dare charge him. Lecter's advice is cast aside. If Graham is upset, he will make mistakes. Luciano wants Graham out of the kitchen where he might be tempted to grab a knife himself.

"Will! We've got comp…Ow!"

Luciano sinks his fingers into Daniel's arms and twists. "*Fottiti*! I said to call him, not warn him, *pezzo di merda…*

Will hears the alarm in Daniel's voice and he recognizes the low rumble of a masculine voice in the slew of Italian curses. He slips a short utility knife in his back pocket hoping it lays flat enough to avoid detection. It's the only place he can hide anything. He's wearing cotton Bermuda shorts and a tee-shirt. He doesn't even have shoes on. His mind spins. Luciano is here…to kill him. For Hannibal.

Dreams prepare us for waking life.

Will breathes deep as he rounds the corner to the living room. Luciano stands in the middle of the room blade angled at Daniel's jugular. Daniel's eyes are huge but he's breathing steady and he's standing perfectly still. That is a good thing. Will hopes Daniel has the presence of mind to trust him and do as he says.

Will moves to stand directly in front of Luciano, hands at his sides. He angles his head to one side and paints his face with a sad pensive expression.

"Hello, Luciano." Will says. "Doctor Lecter sent you?"

Daniel's mouth drops open. He cannot think. He can only watch the horrible nightmare play out in front of him. How did Luciano find him? *Shit. Lecter. Shit... Shit… Fuck…*

Will waits for Luciano to process his options. Luciano is confused. And terrified. Hannibal has his sister. That must be how Hannibal persuaded him to attempt this. Will sighs as he waits. Luciano had no choice.

Luciano nods slowly. "Yes. He sent me."

“He has Lucia.”

“I’m so sorry Mr. Graham.”

“Why are you sorry? You were going to kill me anyway, weren’t you?”

“No…” Luciano pauses. He wonders how Graham could possibly know that. He thinks Verger has been screwing him. Maybe his whole family…

“The Dottore sent me here to kill you.”

“No, he didn’t.” Will says quietly, taking a step toward Luciano as Daniel’s eyes grow wider.

“He didn’t?” Luciano hugs Daniel closer.

“No. He sent you here to die.”

“You think you can kill me? I have to save my sister…”

“She’s already dead, Luciano. And so are you.”

Luciano remembers what Lecter told him about Graham distracting him. Graham is doing it now. Luciano forces himself to stop looking into Graham’s eyes. He needs to finish this. He should shove the doctor away and lunge at Graham. Blade to belly. Slice up. No more Mr. Graham.

“Your sister is dead weight. Dead weight that Lecter will dispose of.” Will says, edging closer.

Will looks into Daniel’s eyes as he speaks and he sees Daniel’s eyes flicker. Will braces himself.

Daniel hears Will’s message and knows what he has to do but the fear is overwhelming. He tells himself he will get hurt but Will won’t let Luciano kill him. He has to believe that. He feels Luciano tense up, feels the anticipation and the bloodlust radiating from Luciano as he prepares to attack Will or him. Daniel has no more time.

Daniel allows his body to sink in Luciano’s arms, like a bag of bones.

The shift in weight throws Luciano off balance and he slices wildly in the air catching Daniel in the gut. Daniel staggers over to the steps searing pain along his stomach causing him to hug his shirt already dampened with blood.

Will sees the blood spreading along Daniel’s shirt but he doesn’t have time to think about it. It takes him only three strides across the hardwood to reach Luciano, pulling the utility knife from his back pocket as he walks. Luciano stoops to rush him, but Will feigns to one side and slices at Luciano who bursts past him, crashing into the bookcase.

Will caught him across the face and though blood trickles over one eye Luciano is unfazed. Like a maddened bull, he turns from the bookcase to lunge at Will, hand outstretched, hilt in his fist and blade horizontal, its edges catching the light as Luciano leaps off the floor at Will. Will remembers Luciano slicing fruit with the same knife.

Luciano has no thought in his head but to sink his knife into Graham anywhere he can. The man is quick and Luciano has to at least injure him to slow him down. Arms outstretched, Luciano shoves a chair out of his way and lunges at the smaller man. But Graham eludes him again.

Will drops to the floor, knees hitting hard but he avoids the blade. Luciano turns and brings the knife up and prepares to lunge again. Will climbs to his feet, sweaty now and slipping along the humid wood. He allows Luciano to get closer. Will knows he has to get that knife from him.

As Luciano raises his hand, Will grabs at Luciano's wrist, pivots and slams Luciano's hand into the wall. Luciano screams in pain as his damaged hand releases the blade from his grasp. Will kicks the knife away.

Luciano swings at Will with his left arm and Will takes the hit to the jaw. He takes another before he can field the punches and return a couple of his own to Luciano's face. Luciano has the better position against the wall. He braces himself and pushes off the wall, his weight and momentum sending Will tumbling backward.

They struggle on the floor, and taking advantage of lessons learned from all those wrestling matches with Hannibal, Will pins Luciano on the hardwood. Without his knife, Luciano holds no advantage over Will. And Will does not require a knife to finish the job.

Will takes a breath before slamming his palm into Luciano's face, effectively driving his nose into his brain. The cracking of bone stifles the cry that erupts and Will feels…exhilarated, euphoric as he looks down at the ruined face of Luciano.

Hannibal stands in the shadows of the backyard. He can see through the lovely French doors that frame the patio. Luciano has served his purpose. Will, his beautiful infuriating Will kneels over his kill, hair a tousled mess, clothes and hands bloodied, but barely out of breath. Hannibal feels a surge of pride swell in his chest and the warm caress of affection alights upon the wound he carries there and he revels in the sweetness of it.

The elegance, the sheer predatory elegance Will had displayed against the heavier and armed Luciano had been thrilling to watch. Hannibal is encouraged by this performance. He is eager to see if Will is up for the encore. Time to find out.

Hannibal takes out Luciano's phone from his pocket. He scrolls through until he finds Will's number. His thumb hovers over the phone as he savors the moment. The moment before he gives Will what he wants.

Will turns his head to glance at Daniel as he kneels over the still body. Daniel is rocking on the steps, arms wrapped around his stomach, shirt stained with blood. Will realizes he is going into shock. He rises slowly from Luciano's body and begins to cross the room.

Before he reaches Daniel his phone rings. Will stops. His phone has not rung in days. He swallows and looks once at Daniel before crossing back to the coffee table where his phone beeps and vibrates along the wood. He picks it up and reads the caller id. He looks to the body on the floor. Luciano is not calling him.

He presses down, puts the phone to his ear and listens.

"Hello, Will." Hannibal says.

Chapter End Notes

A very Happy Easter to all. A reminder that there will be no new chapter Easter Sunday. But the following weekend...YES! Thanks for reading as always.

Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal and Will finish their long awaited phone call. Will’s inferno has followed him out of his dreams. But dreams prepare us for waking life, don’t they? Daniel has some choices to make. Jack arrives in Florence.

> “You killed him with your bare hands.”
>
> Will holds his other hand in front of his face, examines the blood drying between his fingers and nails.
>
> “Yes…I did.” The words come soft, flat. “You sound…pleased.”
>
> “I am. How does that make you feel?”

Chapter 59

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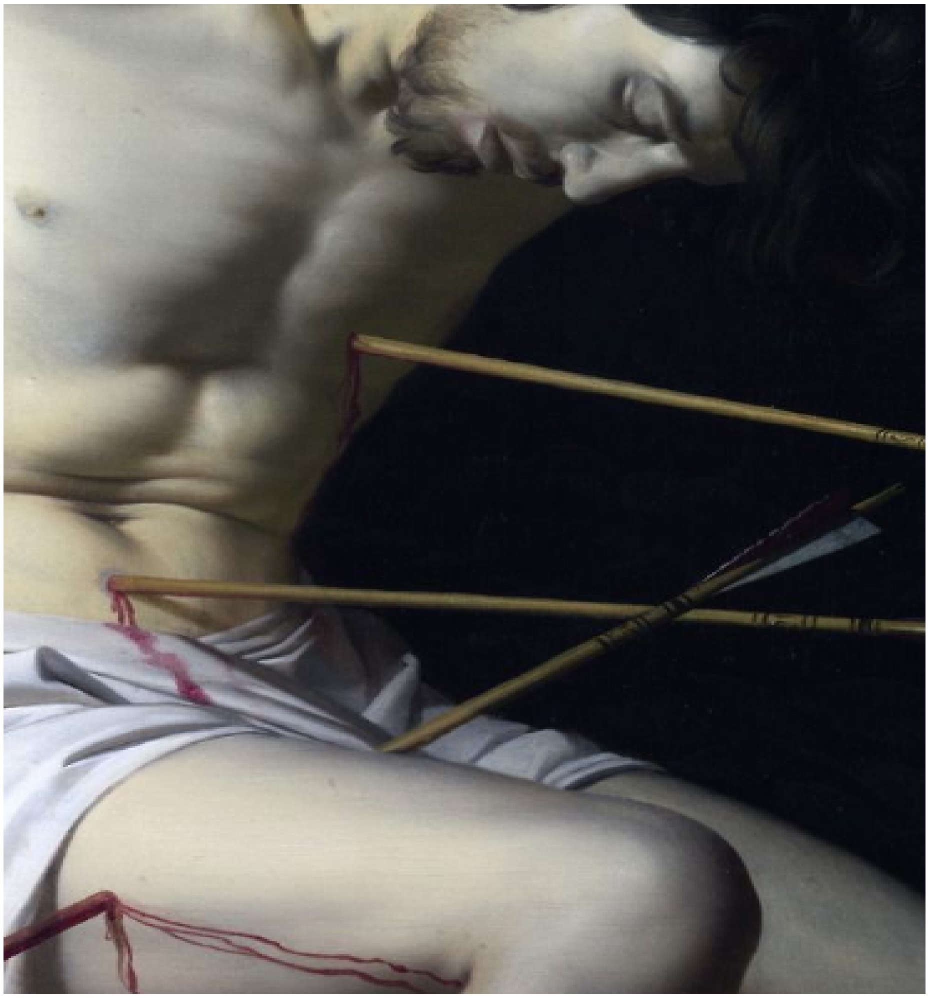

Gerrit van Honthorst, *Saint Sebastian,* detail, ca.1623.

“Hello, Will.” Hannibal says.

Will turns to Daniel and he knows Daniel trembles not only from his own trauma but from every flicker of emotion that courses through Will. Daniel’s eyes grow wide and Will knows that he knows who is on the phone, but Daniel says nothing. Will imagines he is in mild shock, but at least he is responsive and the wound is not gushing blood. Daniel is alright for the moment. Will has to deal with Hannibal first.

Will turns back to the body sprawled beneath him. He hears Daniel move to the kitchen, hears a chair scrape along the floor and water running in the sink. He listens to Daniel hiss softly as he cleans his wound.

Will exhales slowly as he holds the phone to his ear. The voice he has not heard in over a year except in his dreams holds every one of his senses captive. Though memory and imagination recreate it perfectly for him so that he hears every nuance, every syllable pronounced in its peculiar accent and cadence, he hears it now with such clarity, that the voice may as well be his own.

The universe contracts. Will can almost feel the room shrink, vibrations of molecules, every conversation they ever had…

As he moves to stand over Luciano, whose body has ceased its involuntary twitching, the familiar greeting resonates as though nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed. Hannibal's words tumble until they settle in his consciousness as his body tingles with adrenaline, the rush of raw power pulses through veins thick and fast. Will is inebriated with sensation.

Will breathes into the phone he presses to his ear as his thoughts whirl. The memories of his drug induced hallucinations twist around his head, insidiously seeping into the now to straddle the surreal. This is truly madness he thinks, to wonder if he stands over a hallucination or a body. It is madness to grieve the loss of the monster that set his mind on fire. It is madness to want him back.

"Hannibal."

Will waits, uncertain that the phone call is even real but knowing Hannibal will hang on his every breath regardless. His skin tingles all over agitated with the knowledge that Hannibal is nearby. He would have to be. How else could he have timed his call so perfectly? He pictures Daniel's property as the rustling of feathers teases images of his tortured inferno and a talon curved and black scrapes along his stomach. Will's nightmares have once again followed him out of his dreams.

Blonde hairs prickle along his neck and Hannibal is surprised at the sensation. The way Will says his name retains the power to send ripples of electricity under his skin. He thinks too of lips once pressed against his flesh, and is pained that they must now press to plastic instead. To be separated by a few yards of grass and a panel of glass is merely geography. Bridging the chasm between them will take much more than removing physical barriers. Hannibal's heart wrenches and it is as though Will has reached inside his chest to yank yet another piece and rip it from him. Strains of betrayal pluck dark chords still and yet…

You are obsessed with Will Graham.

I'm intrigued.

Obsessively.

The slim tightly muscled figure he remembers stands over the body on the floor, feet planted firmly on either side, head bowed; the familiar face Hannibal can sketch from memory is in profile. Hannibal imagines Will's gift spinning associations faster than Will can catalogue them, his mind sifting relentlessly as he tries to ground himself in the moment. And Hannibal himself the star in the center, around which Will's universe, their universe, spins.

Hannibal does not expect Will to be a fount of confessions this initial encounter. Predator that he is, wounded and on the mend, he will circle and assess first.

And Will is wounded. Hannibal winces inside at the thought of Will recoiling from his touch. Those pale blue eyes would stare him down before allowing Hannibal to come within an arm's reach of him. But, if Achilles aches, so then does his Patroclus. The time for licking one's wounds is over. Worthy adversary or worthy companion?

He looks magnificent despite the bare feet and tatty attire, always a paradox his Will. Only Will could appear so beautifully vulnerable and so deadly at the same time. The stance is involuntary, Hannibal doubts Will is cognizant that he was prompted by his primal instincts to claim his kill in the presence of the other predator.

“You killed him with your bare hands.”

Will holds his other hand in front of his face, examines the blood drying between his fingers and nails.

“Yes…I did.” The words come soft, flat. “You sound…pleased.”

“I am. How does that make you feel?”

Hannibal’s voice winds seductively serpentine through his limbs, twisting him inside out. Will closes his eyes a moment and thinks of his recent retreat with the Hannibal of his imagination. Will decides to trust his instincts, acknowledge them for what they are and indulge the predator Hannibal has summoned this evening. That is what Hannibal wants.

“Alive.”

And Will does feel alive. More alive than he has felt in months.

Hannibal closes his eyes. A sliver of memory beckons. A bowl of water, fresh linen bandages, and raw bloodied knuckles…*Will*...

“You sent me gifts.” Hannibal says, eyes still closed. “That betrays intent to manipulate.”

The tone is cool, provocative, evoking entrenched associations with smooth leather chairs and long stemmed glasses of dark red wine and Will’s chest tightens in anticipation of resuming their deadly game of chess once again.

“Or to communicate. You sent one back.” Will responds, just as coolly despite the heat he feels rising at his neck. “I believe that makes you an Indian giver.”

Hannibal’s eyes flutter open and he chuckles softly, “I believe repurposing would be more… accurate.” A pause and then, “Did your heart race when you killed him?”

“No.” The word drifts from the phone, the single syllable conveying much more than perhaps Will intended.

“And no anticipation of regret.”

“Not this time.”

“More blood and breath to fuel your radiance.” Hannibal purrs, his words edged with pride and possessiveness. Words he knows will both annoy and delight.

The perverted praise descends like a blanket around Will until the familiar frustration flares. He hates that he enjoys pleasing Hannibal. He hates that Hannibal knows this. But the predator within growls with satisfaction as Will looks down upon the broken face of the man who would have killed him.

“More evidence to make me complicit…in your design.” Will returns with as much detachment as he can muster.

“You sent an invitation. I accepted and have sent one of my own. It is…our design.”

Will nods in agreement as he steps over Luciano to flip off the light switch on the wall. The only remaining light is from the lamp in the living room. He pulls the throw from the couch and covers Luciano with it. He walks to the French doors and shuts off the porch lights.

“You’re outside.”

“Yes.”

Hannibal stares at Will on the other side of the glass and watches as Will’s fingers absently splay over his shirt to cradle the wound beneath. A circle of intimacy and violence they share. A blade Hannibal fears cut too deeply.

“Tell me, Will, do you think of me every time you touch your wound as you do now?”

Will drops his hand unaware he had been caressing the scar beneath his tattered shirt. He closes his eyes, annoyed with himself and annoyed that Hannibal caught him. Will allows a wicked and bitter smile to spread across his face in the window.

“Every time. As you intended.” Will has to give Hannibal that one.

Hannibal appreciates the honesty, even more, Hannibal appreciates that Will did not seize upon the opportunity to hurl insults. A sign of acceptance…and a shift toward forgiveness?

Will peers through the glass. It is difficult to see into the house from the back. The house sits at the top of the terraced properties that surround it. Hannibal could only be somewhere on the same level as the patio, otherwise the best view is from the café below and that provides a view of only the patio, like the angle from a pit at the back of a theater. If Daniel had not placed his piano directly in front of the French doors, it would not be visible. Hannibal would have to be very close to see anything at all.

Will considers that Hannibal had sent Luciano gift wrapped and had taken a front row seat to watch Will unwrap the gift. A private performance deliberately orchestrated to occur where Will would have optimal cover in a controlled and familiar environment. As he had done with Tier. Hannibal’s design does not include Will getting arrested. Far from it.

Will listens to Hannibal breathing softly into the phone. He hears nothing but breath, no other sounds to indicate where he is. Will decides he needs a better look. Hannibal enjoys working from the shadows too much. The temptation to touch might draw him out of the shadows into the light, but Will thinks it more likely Hannibal prefers to pulls his strings from the darkness. Hannibal does have one weakness Will can exploit to his advantage.

Wherever Will looks for Hannibal he will find only smoke. But Will stands in the light and Hannibal will feast his eyes upon the one thing he covets.

Hannibal watches Will suddenly lift the handle of the French doors with approval. Hannibal imagines pale blue eyes glittering warily beneath a fringe of curls and lashes, as Will scans the backyard for something that doesn’t belong through the glass. The longing in Hannibal’s chest flares as Will flings open the doors, and he walks unknowingly right toward him. To see him standing on the patio flush with the freshness of his kill invigorates.

His hair is a wild tangle about his head, his soiled shirt hangs off one shoulder, and a spattering of dark droplets stains his arms and legs, lean, muscled, and browned by the sun. Will is stunning in the hazy humid moonlight. Will angles his head just so, and soft light from the house falls on curls, nose, and parted lips as he stands to the side, a shameless taunt of his own. Hannibal's breath catches in his throat and he bares his teeth in the darkness. So infuriating…his Will.

Will wipes at his nose and catches blood on his fingers. He pauses before wiping his hand along the plaid shorts that hang about his hips, stretched from grappling with Luciano. He'll have to dispose of the clothes anyway. He shakes stubborn curls out his eyes before peering into the cloak of darkness. The yard is still and quiet. He hears dogs bark in the distance, and the customers seated at the café below seem undisturbed as they drink and eat. Pop music plays loudly from speakers and Will remembers it is Friday. The real night life in Fiesole has not even started yet.

Will begins to pace the periphery of the patio. "You can see me?" Will asks into the night, more a statement of fact than anything else.

"A loaded question." Hannibal says, "I thought I was seeing you before. Did I ever see…you?"

"You saw what you wanted to see."

"I saw what you wanted me to see."

"Same thing?"

"Perhaps they are."

"Then…I gave you what you wanted."

Hannibal's jaw tightens slightly. The words were meant to provoke. And they did. So infuriating…

Will stops pacing and stands still; lifts his head, and Hannibal can smell his sweat, his cologne, and the unmistakable odor of blood on the breeze. Hannibal thinks that Will seems composed and focused; almost as though he had been expecting this, or something like it. His senses are heightened with adrenaline, his instincts alert, and the killer awakened. Hannibal thinks it promising start.

Hannibal knows Will twists in his inferno still. His associations with Mason and Jack may not be as they appear, but the sting of the wound Will inflicted steeps in a poison too concentrated for a simple antidote. Will is too practiced at deception and Hannibal must tread carefully as he enters Will's inferno.

"Is that what you believe you are doing now?" Hannibal taunts gently.

"I didn't…wade into the quiet of my stream. I am…here." Will says evenly.

"And you believe that is what I want?"

"Isn't it? You left plenty of breadcrumbs in your kitchen."

"And the pantry. Plenty of blood and breath in there. How did you know to come to Florence?"

"How did you know about Freddie Lounds?"

“Ah. The fly in your ointment. Both of us have questions that require firmer ground for answers.”

“Agreed.”

“And while we may have to suffer the sins of omission, Will, I want no lies. I will extend to you the same courtesy. Are we agreed, this time?”

“I will answer you honestly.” Will bites at his lip. Honesty can be so costly. He considers that lies are pretty pricey, too.

“You took Mason’s money to find me.”

“Yes.”

“Knowing the twins would have killed you, both of us, once you found me.”

“Yes.”

“Have you come to kill me?”

“No.”

“To lock me away, then?”

“We’ve already had this conversion. It didn’t end well.”

Hannibal pauses, wets his lips. Will often resorts to sarcasm to either deflect or wound, sometimes both. Hannibal thinks this particular occasion invites both. Proof enough Will languishes still in the inferno of his own design. But meaningful that he has invited Hannibal to join him there. And what of Jack?

“Did Jack take you out of protective custody to hunt for me?”

“Yes.”

“In exchange for your testimony and dropped charges?”

“It seemed a no brainer at the time.”

“Where is Jack?”

“On a flight here I’d imagine.”

“You informed him of the twins’ disappearance. And Mason, too?”

“Both of them.”

“Uncle Jack has left you on a long leash. You aren’t supposed to be here, are you?”

“Not officially. I’m not what the FBI would call reliable.”

“You are dispensable. An embarrassment. Or, is that how Jack wants you to appear?”

“My association with you has effectively destroyed any remaining social ties I might have enjoyed, professionally or otherwise.”

“Fool me once, shame on you…but fool me twice…”

“Shame is up for grabs. You saw to that leaving your home intact, the grunts and poetry of life are now smeared across specimen slides.”

“There wasn’t time to arrange a cleaning service between the ambush and the bloodletting.”

“No…I suppose there wasn’t.”

“Jack knew about us, didn’t he?”

“I don’t know what Jack *knew* before…but he sure has a clear idea now.”

“Jack knew enough not to trust you. He does not trust you now.”

“I know.”

“We are surrounded by Greeks and Trojans. Uncle Jack has sent me his Trojan pony.”

“Yes…his broken Trojan pony.”

“Will you tell Mason or Jack you found me?”

“I haven’t found you. We’re just having a conversation.”

“Are you prepared to place us on firmer ground?”

Will imagines Hannibal crouching somewhere on the ground in the darkness, his muscular frame draped in black, the chiseled features and blonde locks swathed in dark fabric as sweat seeps from every pore. He suffers it without complaint. There are many things about Hannibal that Will has come to admire, his tenacity and capacity to endure discomfort only two.

Will closes his eyes and thinks there are many things he misses about Hannibal, too. Things he should not be thinking about right now. Especially, not now.

Even as Will shoves the thoughts away, the images flash of slamming his body, hard and erect against Hannibal, his mind raging and Hannibal taking every assault, absorbing all of Will’s need and then returning that need, so that Will sobbed against pillows, his fists clenching satin and the scent of sandalwood and spiced leather…

Hannibal watches Will clench his fists and open his eyes to fixate on the café below. He turns his head to gaze about the shrubs to Hannibal’s side, the shrubs that shield him and Hannibal waits, his breathing shallow, barely breath at all until Will speaks.

“I sent the twins to you. You sent Luciano back to me. You have Lucia. Is she dead?” Will says, resuming his pacing.

“Soon.” A long pause and then, “Why did you come to Florence, Will?” Hannibal asks with quiet restraint.

“Why did you accept my invitation?” Will says softly.

Hannibal notes the wistful expression. Will’s question is answer enough.

“There can still be truth between us, obfuscated, buried beneath deceptions and miscommunication, but we deserve to know the truth.”

“I’m listening.”

“You have the capacity to deceive me as I have the capacity to deceive you. But you also have the capacity to transcend the limitations you have placed on yourself.”

“Transcendence through transformation?” Will laughs and imagines himself tumbling through the heavens, scorched black wings and all, to crash upon the rock and rubble of his inferno.

Icarus fell not because he looked up, but because he looked down.

“Before I can be certain of your intentions, *you* must be certain of your intentions.”

“The twins have presented the opportunity to reveal the truth of my intentions? And what are your intentions?”

“They are as they have always been. Our conversations, Will, were only ever about you opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.”

“Who you want me to be.”

So infuriating, his Will. “Isn’t it possible they are one and the same?” Hannibal says patiently.

Will purses his lips and truth sits like bile upon his tongue. He swallows and offers Hannibal the only morsel of honesty he can. “I don’t want them to be the same thing.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Then ask me something else.” Will shudders inwardly at the touch of feathers along his back.

“What do Mason and Jack know?”

“There was video of you accosting the twins at da Vinci airport. Luciano was the only positive ID.”

“But you knew. And you confirmed it for Jack.”

“And Mason.”

“The Paolini will want blood when they find out.”

“If they don’t already know from Mason.”

“How many snares have you placed around my neck this time?”

“How many will you allow?”

“Clever. The twins have been the instruments of Fate. I think we owe them a debt for bringing us together, for providing us with opportunity.”

“You would have me place a snare around my own neck.”

“Yes. You see the design. You once said that neither of us was ideal. But I still carry an ideal of you as you carry an ideal of me, ideals we shared for a time. Cherished ideals we might aspire to.”

Will closes his eyes and is momentarily transported to the red and white draped tent from his drugged out dream. Visions of the anguished Achilles bathing the still body of Patroclus fill Will’s head as he listens to Hannibal.

Hannibal wonders at the bowed head and furrowed brow. Wonders where Will’s imagination has taken him. Wonders at the impulse to cradle Will’s head in his hand and draw him close, to thread his fingers through the mane of curls at the nape of his neck, to inhale the scent of him warm and alive…

“We can use these ideals to frame our discussion. Intentions rendered in plain parallels. Simple. Elegant.” Hannibal says while desire rages beneath the stifling black suit he wears.

“Effective. Each of us understands the *Iliad,* its universal and its…personal connotations.” Will says taking a deep breath as he opens his eyes to scan the darkened yard again to no avail. Hannibal remains secreted among the terraces and flora that dot the hillside.

“To deviate from the ideal can be construed as a deliberate lie, deception, or false representation. Better than using pronouns to convey expectations, don’t you think?”

“Yes.” Will says admitting that Hannibal has found a unique way of keeping their discussion focused and honest. Will thinks this must be a first for him. “So, if we are surrounded by Greeks and Trojans…” Will begins.

“Then, Achilles and Patroclus must clear them away in order to have the honest conversation they desire.”

“Achilles no longer dwells among the Greeks. Why would he want to rejoin them? Achilles can leave anytime he wants.”

“Achilles would not leave his Patroclus. He would deliver him from the Greeks, of course. To destroy the Trojans, together.”

“And if they would survive the Trojans?”

“That would depend on whose armor Patroclus wore.”

“And, for whom he wore it.” Will says, ignoring the tines that seem to erupt along his back.

“Do you know what *contrapasso* means?”

“A symbolic demonstration of poetic justice. Specifically, the punishments of Dante’s nine circles of hell. The kind of poetic irony that appealed to the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“It did, and still does.” Hannibal agrees.

Will thinks of the circle of prints that hung in Hannibal’s salon. They represented four rounds of traitors in the ninth circle. Will thinks it not incidental that one of the rounds was named for Antenor, the betrayer of Troy. He was despised for his betrayal by both sides. Excluded by the enemy and his own. Hannibal's parallels begin to resonate as Will's perspective shifts and associations spark along the locked forts in his mind.

"Twin assassins. Twin tableaux. A double entrée. Served up at the same time I suppose."

Will rolls his neck along his shoulders and feels the weight of wings at his back. He is almost certain Hannibal can see dark feathers rising above his body as he shifts his feet along the bricks.

"Yes, but how many chefs?" Hannibal says.

"Create contradictory evidence. Misdirection. Hiding and revealing identities. *Contrapasso* reeks of the Ripper, yet evokes the Devine Comedy. The FBI will be thoroughly confused. And Mason will be…beside himself."

Hannibal smiles in the darkness. Will's dry wit never fails to tickle. The longing erupts anew. Hannibal has missed this so much…

"Mason may have written his own epitaph with that. As for Jack…isn't it the Ripper who Jack is looking for?" Hannibal says.

"You want to give Jack the Ripper?"

"I want to give Jack a Ripper. Twin tableaux, just alike. I will reveal myself. Will you?"

"Patroclus must answer to the Greeks. He'll have to borrow armor from them. You know I will be asked to look and reveal what I see."

"Patroclus need only slip on the armor of Menelaus for a while, just long enough to confuse. As leader of the Greek fleet, he is the only one to be concerned about. I suspect Patroclus and Menelaus enjoy an uneasy alliance anyway."

"That would be an accurate assessment."

"Your revelations need not be actionable. Merely…insightful. Patroclus need only reveal himself to Achilles. You've done it before. *They know* already, don't they?"

Will's thoughts spin as associations twine around his head. He swears he can see red rimmed eyes peering at him from a clump of shrubs.

They know.

You wanted Jack to come to dinner. You sent him to me so that you would not have to choose. Let Fate decide. Is that what you did, Will?

"The Greeks will be occupied and then the Trojans will strike. Achilles would not rob Patroclus of the honor of joining him. Patroclus cannot summon Fate this time." Hannibal chides.

Will bristles in the moonlight. The wound flares under his shirt. Hannibal knows and it is a relief that he knows. "Fate takes a holiday. The Greek fleet must sink and Troy must be reduced to ashes."

"And then the unveiling of identities can truly begin."

Hannibal watches Will nod, mere yards away from him. The ache to touch him teases at fingertips and twists around his chest. Will is aware of Hannibal's…appetites. It is the reason Will stands where he does, the only place on the patio where the moonlight shines unadulterated, his every movement caught in a luminous glow. If Achilles aches, so then does Patroclus.

"Another battle to test a…" Will hesitates, his tongue stumbling over the words, "a…friendship already frayed and…shattered."

"Fate and circumstance have returned us to a moment when the shattered teacup could be gathered up."

"That teacup would be missing a piece." Will sighs.

"A life without regret would be no life at all. And yet still be a life."

Both of them fall quiet, listening to the other breathe. The wound flinches and invisible talons scrape along his cheek. Will speaks first.

"We would have to synchronize our…efforts. Unassailable ambiguity."

"How much time do you need?"

"I think Sunday morning sufficient. Dawn."

"You already have a concept in mind? I am impressed."

"Can't wait to see yours."

Will's dry retort brings another smile to Hannibal's' lips.

"You'll be working alone. Unless…the doctor?" Hannibal asks, as he knows he must. Clayton is the unknown variable.

"What about him?" Will casts a wary eye toward the house.

"I'll not call on him, unless you give me reason to. How much does he know?"

"Enough not to interfere. At least until this evening. You forced him to be a part of this."

"Tsk. Tsk. I believe you must take responsibility for that. You chose to live with him."

"I was forced to defend myself, again. You have this habit of desecrating my…space."

"A most revealing way to describe your current residence. Very territorial, yet transitory. And you seem to have a peculiar habit of sleeping with your therapists. Does the doctor provide you with an adequate surrogate for me?"

"Your narcissism remains…unrestrained." Will says knowing Hannibal hears the tightness that betrays he has plucked a nerve.

"He looks remarkably like yourself and you think me the narcissist."

"My brand of crazy does not extend to narcissism. His appearance is…incidental."

"Perhaps. I think you are still missing pieces of yourself. Of which pieces of him have you availed yourself?"

Will smiles and hopes Hannibal can see. "I think it rude to ask."

"If it's any comfort, I instructed Luciano to leave the doctor unharmed. He didn't listen."

"I'll be sure to convey that to him." Will pauses, "Why would you tell Luciano that?"

"I'm curious about your association with him. He is neither Greek nor Trojan and his part in the story has yet to be written…by you. I should let you check his injuries. He may require stitches."

"Are you offering your services?"

"Would you prefer to call 911?"

The annoyed look on Will's face indicates he would not. Clayton may not agree. Hannibal will have to miss that conversation.

"I think the cut was superficial. I can see him in the kitchen. He seems…okay, for now."

"Then, I will leave him to you. Once the tableaux are discovered, your movements will be monitored."

"I'm aware of that."

"I have great faith in you, Will. Always have. You will try not to disappoint this time?"

"Everything I have done was only ever about doing what I thought best for both of us."

"And we see where that thinking has gotten us. How did you know to come to Florence, Will?"

Will sighs and paces. How Hannibal loves his quid pro quos.

"Of all the places we talked about, Florence was the only Italian city you never mentioned by name, the only one you never admitted to visiting, and given your interests I found that an odd omission."

Hannibal is taken aback. He doesn't remember consciously doing so, but he must have. Will has managed to surprise him yet again. So wonderfully, infuriatingly unpredictable…his Will.

"That's it?" Hannibal manages.

"I honed in on Hobbs on much less." Will reminds him. "How did you find out about Lounds?"

"I found her the same way I found you."

"That's…not an answer." Will counters, capturing Hannibal's tone and inflection perfectly.

"It is the answer I am prepared to give. I anticipate the topic of one Freddie Lounds to figure prominently in future…conversations. I look forward to our next encounter."

Will imagines those future conversations will provide opportunity for plenty of revelation and recrimination, but he holds his tongue. Hannibal is entitled to a little grousing. He has been generous, more generous than Will had imagined he would be. And every bit as self-serving.

“You won’t be invited to the crime scenes this time. How do you plan on viewing my…monument to Luciano?”

“Leave that to me. Sunday morning you said? I’ll be ready. May I call you again?”

“If you are extending the courtesy, sure.”

Will sighs into the phone, aware he doesn’t want to hang up and he thinks Hannibal is every bit as reluctant as he is. Will is not surprised when Hannibal offers a parting shot before ending the call.

“Of course. And Will?”

“Yes…Hannibal?”

“I am pleased you wear the same cologne. I like it on you. I would know it anywhere.”

Will stands on the patio as the silence fills the concentrated universe of a moment ago, expanding it, so that Will feels lost in the enormity. Whether Hannibal has moved or waits to move does not matter. The event horizon has dipped into chaos. Will has prayed for release from his inferno and Fate has sent him Hannibal.

God is beyond measure in wanton malice and matchless in his irony.

Will stands at the precipice of his inferno looking into the abyss. His mouth tastes metallic, his universe once again stale and sterile until he walks through the French doors into the kitchen.

Daniel stands at the counter and Will smells the ocean, feels the soft inviting mist envelop him, soothing nerves so raw, Will had not realized his senses had become numb to the prickle of a thousand needles along his flesh.

“You were out there for a while.” Daniel says.

Daniel gives Will the once over as he presses the cold facecloth against his stomach. As Daniel contends with his own emotions he is also inundated with the array of disturbing and conflicting emotions from Will. His own feelings are compounded by the added torrent and Daniel feels split in two.

He finds himself looking at Will from without and from within. Without knowing what was said between Hannibal and Will, Daniel knows the balance Will has tried so hard to maintain has shifted…toward Hannibal. The awareness that he remains Will’s anchor weighs heavily and as Daniel dabs more peroxide on his wound he wonders how long before Will snips the fraying tether altogether, to sail unencumbered toward the churning seas of Charon, to traverse Cocytus’ frozen lake, to finally catch the beast that chases him.

The scar under his shirt twinges in sympathy as Will looks at Daniel perched over the sink, dressing his wound. He hasn’t bandaged it up yet, allowing the wound to stop bleeding before wasting fresh gauze that Will knows is in short supply around the house. Daniel does not keep a ready supply of medical gauze on hand on the off chance an assassin comes knocking.

Will’s face falls with thoughts of the dogs.

“Where…are Cara and Bella?’

Daniel looks up and manages a thin smile. Encouraged, Will crosses to him and immediately grasps Daniel’s shoulder.

“They are in the garage. Probably not happy, but safe.”

Will’s entire body relaxes. “How bad is it?” Will asks leaning down to have a look.

“Not as bad as it could have been. Nothing like yours.”

As Will examines the wound, images of the assault register and he recreates the moment of Daniel’s dead drop in his mind. Luciano was flailing on instinct at that moment, aware a fraction of a second too late to adjust his thinking. The impulse to hold onto his bargaining chip remained too long before the instinct to attack the threat kicked in. As Will had hoped.

“Looks like the tip of the blade punctured, but the rest is a graze. You twisted away and the blade didn’t follow through. Lucky.”

“Doesn’t feel lucky.” Daniel says.

“It’s not going to get less dangerous, Daniel. I can’t…protect you. I’d be lying if I said I could.”

“Wouldn’t want you to lie, Will.” Daniel says, and the clipped words strike Will hard like a slap, which, he supposes is exactly what it is.

“You think I knew Luciano was coming here and didn’t tell you.”

“Did you?”

“I considered it, but telling you would have only made you nervous. I’m not surprised I hallucinated about killing at the hospital. What happened here was a possible outcome. What I explained to you, was the hoped for outcome.”

“I’m not following this time. I guess I don’t understand what you are basing the outcomes on.”

“You understand Hannibal pretty well, but you have only just met him. There’s a way we communicate that is…exclusive.”

“By design.”

“By intimacy. We are so far into each other’s heads that…”

“You’ll never really be alone. I know.” Daniel holds out the strip of gauze to Will. “You mind?”

Will nods and begins to wash his hands in the sink. He watches Daniel as he stares at the red stained water run down the drain. Will thinks those green eyes will pop right out of his head when he sees what Will plans on doing with Luciano.

He dries his hands and then sets to work wrapping the gauze around Daniel’s stomach. It should heal well. Daniel’s first aid kit was well stocked and Daniel knows how to use it. Will notes the bottle of Glenlivet on the counter has been opened, a tumbler sits beside it, pale amber residue pooling at the bottom.

Will nods at the bottle and Daniel grins. “Help yourself.”

Will doesn’t even bother to get out another glass. He refills Daniel’s tumbler a couple fingers full and tosses it down relishing the heat as the whiskey paints his throat. The heat radiates and Will is steadied in the moment. He refills the tumbler and hands it to Daniel.

Daniel accepts, but sips at the single malt, having already done a couple shots. He watches Will dress his wound as emotions ebb and flow, rolling waves breaking upon two shores. His, and Will’s.

“Tell me about these outcomes.” Daniel says.

“I told you what could possibly happen, not what might be more likely to happen. I sent the twins hoping Hannibal would find them snooping around. I believed he was in Florence and I had to shake him out because he wasn’t making appearances himself.”

“Sending the twins was like taking out a personal ad. The only kind Hannibal would respond to.”

“Yes. Words only get you so far with Hannibal. I had to know his intentions…about me. If he killed both twins and arranged them in one of his murder tableaux, then he would have been communicating a completely different message than the one he did send.”

“The first outcome, the one you told Jack and Mason about, would have been a taunt to all of you. Like turning his back on you…giving you the finger so to speak.”

“Exactly. My trespass forgiven, but not forgotten. A double tableau from him would mean he considered me the enemy.”

“But that’s not what he did. He wants you back.”

“And he provided the means to deliver to Jack what he wants while providing me the means to accept, if I want. Or, I can tell Jack what is going on and go after him with the FBI at my back.”

“But if you do, you’ll sever the connection between you, forever. And that’s not what you want. Does he know what you want?”

“He isn’t sure. That’s why he returned half the invitation. I can still play along, hook him like I did before, but it would be much more difficult this time. And my hands would be dirty again. If he goes down, so will I.”

“And that is a scenario you’re entertaining, isn’t it?”

“You think I moved past revenge to redemption?

“I think you think you can have both. Make the ultimate sacrifice. Martyr yourself and take him with you.”

“You are very direct. I’m not contemplating suicide, Daniel.”

“Martyrs don’t see their actions as suicide. Suicide sends us to hell. Martyrs go to heaven.”

“I don’t believe in heaven.”

"But you do believe in hell. You're already there."

Will blinks and bites his lip but decides not to comment. He stands back to allow Daniel to check the bandage. Daniel rubs his hand across the gauze wrapping and nods. He points to the amber prescription bottle on the counter and Will hands him the pain killers, noting how nice it must be to be able to prescribe any number of mind numbing opiates for yourself. He thinks it just as well that he didn't go to med school.

"You aren't seeking retribution or a reckoning any more. You want redemption. It's the only way out of your inferno."

"If I betray Hannibal again, if I join him in this joint venture only to turn against him, I will remain in that inferno because I…I don't want to betray him. I…don't even want to bring him in."

"You used Jack and Mason to get here. To find him. For what? For what, Will?"

"To find myself. You've known all along. You guided me here, to this place in my mind."

"So Hannibal is holding out an olive branch. And you think that leading him on in order to trap him isn't a path to redemption? After all he's done?"

"Not the path I need. Hannibal's universe is inverted. So is my inferno. Redemption is a concept. Concepts are malleable in Hannibal's universe, therefore, redemption is also inverted. Hannibal has let me know that betrayal is a cardinal sin for him. He placed that circle of prints in his salon for me. You know he casts himself and me in the lead roles of his own *Iliad*. It is no coincidence in his thinking that he placed the betrayer of Troy on his wall for me to see."

"Antenor. A signal that you would suffer the fate of Antenor should Patroclus ever betray Achilles. But you already did."

"Yes. And it is uncharacteristic of Hannibal to entertain self-doubt or offer second chances, let alone express that doubt. But he feels responsible for my betrayal. Sees it as a failure on his part."

"He left you alive so you could decide. He recognized how conflicted you were…are."

"And he is curious. Curious about me, but also curious if he made a mistake."

"Did he?"

"I wrestle with that every day."

"You are aware you must be the only person on the planet to rate such…courtesy."

"I am…painfully aware."

"Will, you do understand that you have this…habit…of allowing circumstance and fate make decisions for you. It's like Hannibal keeps tossing you the ball and you toss it up in the air."

"I remain…ever with that ill band of angels mixed, undecided and…indifferent."

"Huh. Well, in the meantime…what are you going to do…with that?" Daniel inclines his head toward the heap of bone and flesh beneath the throw blanket.

A wicked smile tugs at Will's lips as he looks into Daniel's anxiety ridden face.

"Can I use your basement?"

Luciano's body lay in pieces on a fold out picnic table in the makeshift morgue Will has hastily put together in Daniel's basement. The subterranean walls are cool and dry, the environment perfect for preserving the partitioned pieces of the naked corpse. Will's imagination has created a design that Hannibal should find sublime.

Jack will be outraged at the excess, the *overkill*, and Mason… Will smirks at the thought of Mason seeing the photographs Jack will surely pass on to him. Mason will most certainly be beside himself, and worried if he has not already completely lost his mind.

Will wipes the perspiration from his forehead. The basement may be chilly, but hacking up a body and removing its organs requires strength and precision if one wishes to do it right. And Will does want to do it right.

He had sent Daniel out with a grocery list of sorts and Daniel had been happy to oblige even at the late hour and despite his wound. Gulping down a handful of painkillers had likely helped his mood, but Will knows he will have to face the music with Daniel sooner or later. Sending him out of the house allows Daniel to put some distance between them, gives him time to think.

Will knows Daniel will not seek out the authorities. He knows how Daniel feels about him and Will is fully aware that he is exploiting those feelings to his advantage. He tells himself he did warn Daniel. Daniel is not blind to what Will is dealing with in Hannibal and neither is he mired in misconception about what Will is either. He has remained Will's therapist and much more. Daniel's therapy has been instrumental in Will's efforts to find his answers. Daniel has found ways to make nearly every moment between them at least tangential to therapy.

Will thinks Daniel might be filing recent events, even his grocery run, under therapy as well.

I'm going to need Saran wrap, too. A lot.

Will, it's after nine. There's stuff on this list that…

I'm not fussy and you are resourceful. We'll make it work.

What's this "we" Kimosabe?

Will suspects that Daniel's constant joking is his own coping mechanism kicking in. Will can identify with that. Daniel's wit often mirrors his own, and it has become progressively darker over the last couple weeks. His own feelings and thoughts and his empathy with Will's have become entwined to the point that Will doubts Daniel can discern between them anymore. Sending Daniel out provides some much needed separation, for Daniel's own mental health.

How many consciences devastated?

Despite the repeated cries of *we're just alike*, Will has not fully digested the mantra Hannibal had drilled into his head with such meticulous deliberation that Will could parrot the phrase back in identical intonation and manufactured accord. He had swallowed the conditioning as he had swallowed other delicacies from Hannibal's menu of madness, debauched indulgences, some tasty, some not so tasty. And Will had knowingly subjected himself to every single one.

Hannibal had, continues to have, an understanding of Will's mind that often eludes Will. He is a master at applying behaviorism because he does not exist within the same universe as everyone else. He has excluded himself from it, and to his thinking, has risen above it. His curiosity is pure, unfettered by conventional morality.

Which is why Will's gift of pure empathy enthralls, intrigues, and seduces him. Will acknowledges that the fact that that his gift comes wrapped in a pretty package seals the deal for Hannibal. Hannibal seeks to experience humanity from Will's perspective, to see and feel the ugliness and the beauty that for him has always been academic.

Hannibal exists in his epic universe of exclusion, but he is alone in it. Only Will and Will alone possesses not only the ability to give him the perspective he desires, but the ability to see him, understand and accept him for who and what he is truly is.

It is consistent with Hannibal's pathology that he cannot see any desire but his own. Typically, he cannot sympathize, let alone empathize with the ensuing carnage left in the wake of indulging his relentless curiosity. Until Will.

As angry, as enraged and wounded as Hannibal was that night in the kitchen, he could not bring himself to kill him. Hannibal did not allow him to live to punish him, leaving Will branded with a perpetual reminder of who gutted him and why was the punishment; to Hannibal's mind he had bestowed mercy, an inversion of his own universe, a cross into Will's universe, so that Will's gift would allow him to interpret the punishment for what it really was. An act of love.

Will remembers Hannibal's random acts of kindness interposed between the manipulations and utter destruction. Caught up in his own web of deceit and lies in his role of lure, Will had not gone beyond patting himself on the back for performing his part well. He had been too focused on his own conflicted emotions and on keeping up appearances to accurately interpret all of his interactions with Hannibal.

As he removes the slippery organs from Luciano's exposed chest cavity to slip one by one into freezer bags he can't imagine will fit in Daniel's fridge, he remembers one particular instance that had begun as manipulation on Will's part, but had turned into something genuine between them. Will thinks that the genuineness they had shared in the sanctity of the salon had started to spill into the embattled arena of wits outside its hallowed walls without Will or Hannibal realizing it.

Hello, Will.

Hannibal's words had punctuated the crisp air as he had stood on Will's front porch one dismal grey morning in Wolf Trap. Words spoken with the same timbre and tone that had spilled from the phone Will had held to his ear only hours ago. Rich. Affectionate. Intimate.

The dogs had been roused from their dozing in front of the fireplace to bark and Will had looked out the front window. Hopping on one leg while slipping the other into a pair of pants, he had wondered at Hannibal's shiny Bentley rolling up his drive. Will had opened his front door, dogs clustered and curious about who had been rapping softly, but insistently on the other side after Will had finished zipping up his fly. As he had opened the heavy wood to peer through the screen at the tall figure silhouetted by the winter sun at his back, Will had noticed the leather handled wood case in his hand and the drawing pads and easel under his arm.

"Hannibal…what…? Come in."

Will had opened the door and Hannibal had stridden inside, deposited his case, easle, and pads on a chair and had leaned over to greet the dogs sniffing at his trousers. He had tossed some treats none too slyly onto the rug causing Will to raise a cautionary brow at him which had sent Hannibal to slipping the plastic bag of indeterminate meat by-products back into his coat.

Hannibal had not worn his customary suit and overcoat that morning. He had stood in leather boots and thick umber colored corduroy trousers, emerald green pullover and thick wool sweater with zipper opened, looking like a country squire on retreat at his hunting lodge and quite at ease with himself. Will had watched him pull his suede jacket from his shoulders to drop it too into the chair. Will's fingers had absently retrieved his tepid coffee from his work table where he had taken his breakfast.

"It was late when you left last night, but I recall you had mentioned you wanted a drawing of a particular place." He had said, glancing at Will's work table adrift in tackle, feathers, and wire and the discarded remains of his breakfast. Bagel, cream cheese, and grapefruit, left largely uneaten on the plate.

"That is, if I'm not interrupting."

Will had stood coffee mug in hand and lips parted, awestruck that Hannibal had taken him up on his open ended invitation so quickly. The night before, he had stayed for Jambalaya and had drunk snifters of brandy in the salon afterward. Will remembers finally stumbling upstairs one hand clutching the bannister, a bottle of French Armagnac in the other. Will had been flipping through Hannibal's sketch pad earlier, before dinner, in the kitchen, while Hannibal had been prepping. Inspired by the artistic talent evident in the charcoals Hannibal had drawn *of* Will, on a whim, Will had asked him to draw a picture *for* him.

You should come out to Wolf Trap. Bring your supplies. There's a place less than half a mile from my house that might appeal to your aesthetics.

"*Not interrupting at all*." Will had said, fishing lures forgotten in the wake of Hannibal's arrival. He'd had plenty of time for Hannibal. He no longer had lectures to prepare for, no papers to grade. He had been unemployed, back in therapy, his only task to reel Hannibal in for Jack. Lounds had been in protective custody and Mason had been recuperating with his eels.

He and Hannibal had been perched precariously on the event horizon of total chaos, the imminent blood bath in Hannibal's kitchen was mere days away, but the two of them had been lost in the universe they had created, in a kind of calm before the storm.

"Coffee?"

"*Thank you, no. I had some on the drive over. Left the thermos in the car."*

Hannibal had gestured toward a chair, had waited for Will to nod, and had plunked himself down. "*I'll wait while you finish getting dressed. You can show me the place you were talking about."*

Will had rubbed at whiskers and had felt a smile spread across his face despite himself as he had looked at Hannibal sitting expectantly in the chair, waiting for him to pull on the rest of his clothes. Will often made other people uncomfortable; but never Hannibal. Will cannot remember an awkward moment between them. Their awareness of each other, their acceptance of each other had been complete.

"*You could have mentioned coming over last night*." Will had said, opening the drawer for socks and grabbing at rumpled flannel from the bottom of the bed.

"*One never knows when inspiration will strike. I thought I would surprise you…"*

This is the Hannibal Will wants. The one he came to know in the salon, the one who drove out to Wolf Trap to draw a landscape simply because Will had asked him to. Will had seized the moment to endear himself to Hannibal that afternoon while looking at nude sketches of himself, but he had been moved to ask Hannibal to come out and draw an actual landscape he'd had in mind because he had admired the talent and because he had wanted Hannibal's company. Had wanted to share a piece of his world with him, and apparently, Hannibal had been eager to accommodate him.

Will bites at his lip as he drops the large intestines he has just sealed in the bag into the ice filled laundry bucket. His mind burns, thoughts and memory consumed like flame to paper.

He has felt alone without Hannibal. And he does not want to be alone. But the Hannibal he came to know no longer exists.

The Hannibal who had sequestered Abigail for months, who had warmed to the idea of family so much, he had risked his practice, his home, and his life upon Will sharing it with him. A missed opportunity. That Hannibal will never be.

Instead, Will has inspired bitterness and distrust, reaffirmed all of Hannibal's darkest perceptions of humanity. He had believed Will above all that. In Hannibal's exclusionary universe, it is Will who has offended. If Hannibal had let loose the monster growing inside of Will, then Will had surely released a much darker monster in Hannibal.

Will has tried to imagine how the events of that night in the kitchen at 5 Chandal Square have changed Hannibal. Will's betrayal has left its mark; he'd had his reckoning and then some. But, Hannibal had been affected by Will long before that. Forgiveness may have fallen from Hannibal's lips that night, but that forgiveness had come with a terrible price. Wounds are supposed to heal. Uncertainty beats like a drum beneath the melody composed of all those orchestrations of carbon, beneath the grunts and poetry of their lives.

Will thinks if he is uncertain, then so is Hannibal. They are just alike, alone without each other. Hannibal sent Luciano to test him. To problem solve together. Hannibal wants, too. Hannibal is offering an opportunity to repair their fractured friendship. Hannibal will demand Will's actions seek forgiveness while he waits for the words.

Friendship can sometimes involve a breach of individual separateness.

You're not my friend. The light from friendship won't reach us for a million years. That's how far away from friendship we are.

Will laughs inwardly. Apparently, a million years passes quickly in Hannibal's universe.

I wanted to surprise you.

And you…wanted to surprise me…

Will's mind reels with Hannibal's proposal. It is unthinkable that he can wriggle out of it. Even if he packed and left on the next plane to anywhere, there would be consequences. There are always consequences with Hannibal. Will has suffered enough of Hannibal's consequences to know he dares not inflict them on anyone else. And Hannibal would.

Hannibal would eventually find Will, again. In the meantime, he would wreak his vengeance on those left in the wake of Will's departure. Daniel foremost among them.

Will decides to turn his mental efforts to reflect on their phone conversation. A conversation with Hannibal always requires repeated review. Will knows there were things said during the conversation that clicked, that tapped into his subconscious awareness. Hannibal had asked if Will had come to kill him. Or to lock him away.

Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?

I liked killing Hobbs.

Killing must feel good to God, too. He does it all the time. And are we not created in his image?

How would killing me make you feel?

Righteous

I discovered a truth about myself when I tried to have you killed.

That doing bad things to bad people makes you feel good?

Yes.

If Hannibal is so bad, by Will's own admission, it should feel good to do bad things to him. But it wouldn't. Good and evil. Up and down. Dante suffered his journey through hell and escaped by accepting God's absolute divinity without question like any pious Catholic would in the Fourteenth century. He finds redemption for his own sin which, Will thinks it odd that Dante never discloses what it was the entire poem.

Will wipes his brow, sweat trickles beneath his chin and he impatiently wipes at that, too. His anatomy lessons with Hannibal as he had taken Tier apart guide his hands now as he systematically removes the organs in the order Hannibal had taught him. He thinks he will have to buy Daniel a new set of steak knives, however.

The anticipation of regret figures prominently in killing Hannibal, and Will should not anticipate any regret, quite the opposite, but he does. He would feel an overwhelming amount of regret.

Will wants out of his inferno. But he has trapped himself in his own circles of hell without a blueprint. Will's inferno is inverted because Will constructed it as Hannibal's home away from home. The devil is in the details. The answers are in his head, and he will find them.

Will knows the blueprint of Hannibal's thinking is in his head, fractured and scattered through their conversations. If the devil is in the details then Will needs to consider the negative to see the positive. If Hannibal exists in his own universe, then that universe must have its own structure. If Hannibal's universe is exclusionary, then it follows that his rejection of the normative universe would be based on a blanket rejection of its normative values. Values catalogued in the standard guide book normative society professes to revere.

What is the gospel according to Hannibal? Hannibal wants to know why Will hasn't killed him. Hannibal wants to know the gospel according to Will, too.

Daniel sits in his driveway looking at his house and wondering what he will find inside when he goes in. He has managed to find everything on Will's list and spend less than he thought which is a good thing because he is about out of cash. None of his purchases are traceable at least on paper. As for cameras, Daniel is not certain, but he decides that consideration is quite beyond his control as he fumbles with the keys in the ignition.

He lugs a couple bags of Will's supplies out of the trunk and begins hefting them up the walk thinking there is quite a lot beyond his control. He wonders if Will would consider control an illusion or another malleable concept. He sniggers as he drops the bags onto the kitchen table and thinks Will would find control an illusory concept.

The dogs sniff at his sneakers and sweat pants and he digs through the supplies to find the bag of dog treats. The bag proves problematic to open; his fingers can't seem to grip the little ribbon properly to rip the seam, so he tries tearing the bag with his teeth. He hears thumping from the basement steps and turns to see Will climb to the landing just as treats spill from the bag that hangs empty from Daniel's mouth.

"Oops." Daniel manages letting the bag drop from his lips onto the floor.

Will grips his mouth with his hand to keep from smiling. Daniel is swimming in oxycodone. He clearly over medicated, probably on purpose. He heaves a deep sigh and decides this is going to be a long night.

As Will kneels down on the floor to retrieve the treats the dogs have not gulped down, he collects his thoughts and decides on the best way to deal with the spaced out Daniel. How quickly their roles have reversed.

"Are there still bags in the car?"

"Um…yeah. I'll get them. Where did I park?"

"It's ok. I'll get them. Where did you put the med…ah, I see it."

Will gets up and grabs the bottle of pills from the counter, puts them in his pocket. He turns to find Daniel staring at him, a very lit grin spreads across his smooth cheeks and the bruise Will gave him shines beneath the glare of the overhead light. Daniel is a bit of a mess and Will is to blame for it, all of it.

"Will?" Daniel says as he slides into a chair to slump over the kitchen table. "I want to know what you are going to do with all that stuff…in my car."

"You already know."

"No, no. I mean what are you making…exactly?"

“I think you should…maybe take a little nap before we get into all that.”

“I know I’m high…didn’t mean to but, well…oops. But with Luciano…what kind of *contrapasso* are you planning for a hired assassin?”

Will opens the fridge and takes a bottle of water. He grabs one for Daniel and cracks it open for him. Daniel is high on pain killers, but he’s lucid enough for conversation. Will thinks he might become sleepy with the effort of talking and the steady drone of their voices. Will can use a break from the tedium downstairs. He rubs at his eyes thinking perhaps he must be beyond tired to characterize the nightmare downstairs as tedium.

He pulls up a chair to share his madness with his traumatized and drugged out therapist. Will thinks the number of ways with which one can ruin people’s lives must be endless. And Will isn’t even a psychiatrist.

“I mean,” Daniel starts up again, “…what is all the fucking Saran wrap for?”

“I’ll explain, but are you sure you want to help me? I can do this by myself. I’m already using your house. I have made you complicit in a criminal act.”

“I’m helping you desecrate a corpse. A slap on the wrist.” Daniel says taking a sip of water.

“By the time this is all said and done, I doubt that would be the only charge brought against you. You could lose your license.”

“When I tell them this is therapy I imagine I’ll be out of a job anyway.”

In for a penny, in for a pound.

Will shakes his head. Daniel is as stubborn and as crazy as he is. Will is certain Daniel’s empathy has more to do with the similarities than either of them realized.

“Daniel, you have done enough. Been exposed to enough. If you want to sit this out…”

“You think I don’t know what all this means?”

Daniel waves his arms around the kitchen, gestures toward the basement steps.

“You tell yourself there are reasons you have to do this. That you have no choice, that he could frame you, plant evidence like he did before, even that he threatened you, or me, if you didn’t. But you want to do this, Will. I know you do.”

Will sits quietly listening. He can’t argue with Daniel because it is true.

“You need to free yourself from your inferno. You want redemption, in whatever form that might take.”

“Yes.” Will says simply. “Will you help me?”

Daniel looks into Will’s eyes, and his chest tightens like a rock inside. The ache runs so deep he can barely stand it. He wants what he cannot have and it is own fault he let his feelings for Will go this far. With every touch and taste of Will and his universe, Daniel has sunk so far down in Will’s rabbit hole that he is mired in it up to his neck.

And it is out of this well of love that his desire to help springs. Daniel cannot help who he is any more than Will can help who he is. Daniel's eyes mist up, but tears do not spill. He tells himself he won't let the tide of emotions that are suffocating him spill down his face as he looks at Will.

"I have never hated myself more than I do right now, in this moment, but I will not go quietly into the night, Will. Yes. I will help you."

It takes Will but second to reach across the table and pull Daniel close. He presses his forehead to Daniel's and waits for the knot in his throat to sink to his stomach where it roils with all the other knots coiled like serpents in a pit.

"I'm sorry." He mumbles into soft curls so like his own.

"So am I." Daniel mumbles back.

* * *

Since Daniel's basement is situated deep in the ground at the top of a hill, it's location permitted the architect to design a drainage system that includes a drain in the floor. Will is eternally grateful for such foresight as he scrubs the floor.

Use the organic cleaner, Will. Bleach is much too obvious and it will change the color…

He checks his phone for the time. Almost eleven, but it seems later than that. He glances at the coolers stacked against the wall and at the selectively sectioned corpse on the table and sighs in resignation. He still has a lot of work to do. He thinks he should put on a pot of coffee. Perhaps some of that espresso Daniel keeps in the fridge.

Daniel is asleep on the couch upstairs. He insisted he would only need a nap, no need to go up to third floor where it is at least ten degrees warmer. Will hopes he sacks out for the night. The thought of sleep is appealing but Will knows he has to wrap up the pieces of Luciano on the table and get them chilled and stiff before he can assemble his monument.

He blinks his eyes into focus and places the mop back in the bucket before turning his attentions back to the table and the boxes of Saran wrap. As he begins wrapping Luciano's head with its smashed nasal passages and splintered brow he hears the hum of his phone as it vibrates. He swallows and reaches for it at the other end of the table.

He stifles the temptation to mute the damned thing and picks it up.

"Hello, Jack."

"Hello, Will. Sorry to call so late. I just landed at da Vinci, couldn't get the flight I wanted into Peretola. Am I interrupting anything?"

"Nothing in particular." Will says. "You called to tell me you landed?"

"I called because I thought you might have some concerns about not hearing from me for a couple days. I guess I was wrong about that."

"No…I am concerned, just…tired. It's late. Please…go ahead."

"All right then. Glad we're on the same page."

"Same old page, Jack."

"I take it nothing happening on your end? No news of the twins?"

"No news. No goodies in the trunk of their rental car?"

"Zip. Zee and the crew went over it with a fine toothed comb, but it doesn't seem they even got in the vehicle. Plenty of evidence confirming their identities in the luggage though."

Will frowns remembering the email from Zee. "How is Zee, anyway?"

"Good. They're all good. Some new people you have never met… I should tell you that I've brought Mason back into it, provisionally."

"What do you mean, provisionally? He wants me dead, Jack."

"I didn't tip our hand, but if I don't there won't be anyone to control the Paolini and my sources tell me that they can really fuck up an investigation if they decide to. I'll keep an eye on you, I promise."

Will has no doubt of that.

"What's done is done, then. Where are you staying? Not driving to Florence tonight are you?"

"I'll be in Rome a couple days. I have to meet with the Interpol liaisons and coordinate with them first. I can't work with the local LEOs in Florence until I do."

"And how is Purnell with all of this? Does she know I'm here?"

"That…is the other reason I called, Will."

"That…doesn't sound good."

"It isn't. You are now here very provisionally. I'm going to need your psychiatrist to sign off on you. It will keep you in the country, Will. Can he do that?"

"You mean just rubber stamp me, or…"

"Will. Just get it done or start packing."

"Fine, Jack. I'll have the paperwork by the time you see me. When will that be anyway?" Will says as he tugs at another piece of wrap for the chunk of shoulder he holds in his other hand, phone tucked between ear and neck.

"Not until after the weekend. I'll call when I know more."

"Okay." Will says wondering how much longer Jack is going to take. Will thinks he must have to go claim his baggage or something.

"Before I let you go, I wanted to pick your brain about something." Jack says.

Will glances at the freshly scrubbed head of Luciano, face flattened with a yard of wrapping.

"Pick away. What's on your mind?"

“If Hannibal has both the twins, and I’m sure he does, how do you think he will display them?”

“You mean the logistics or the actual arrangement?”

“The logistics. That’s two bodies. He’s never done a double before.”

“He’s never had two assassins after him before. Two bodies would mean more chances of leaving evidence. He’ll have to be very careful.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. Is it possible he would do them separately?”

“That’s a good question, Jack. But they are twins. He might use that in his design.”

“You know them, know their…habits.”

“Habits won’t matter. They were sent to kill him; that’s enough of an affront right there. But, to punish them, to insult the family, he might separate them. They are, were inseparable. I never saw them apart.”

“Huh…there was a reason for that I think you are aware of.”

“I was. What does Mason think about all this?” Will cracks his neck and gives up trying to wrap and hold the phone at the same time.

“Mason has people scrambling to smooth things over with the Paolini. Like I said, I need him. He just wants Hannibal more than ever. As do I.”

“Well, Jack, I’ll give the twin angle some thought. And read up on Sardinian culture and recipes. You should probably do the same if you haven’t already.”

“Recipes?”

“Which organ meats do Sardinians prefer? Hannibal will celebrate by making an authentic dish.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake… That’s…probably a good idea but I doubt I’ll have the time to do any research. That’s what you get to tag along for. I’ll uh…call you in a couple days then. Thanks for picking up.”

“No problem. Good night, Jack.”

“Good night, Will.”

Will clicks off his phone and rubs at his face as he lifts his head to stare at the rafters. He shakes his head and presses teeth to tongue as he stifles the chuckles that threaten to erupt amidst the anxiety and the fatigue. As he stands staring at the naked bulb overhead, he decides to put on some of that espresso and go splash his face with some cold water a few times.

The thought occurs to him that he hasn’t had any hallucinations since he started working. He can’t decide if that is a good thing, or a bad thing. His entire day has felt surreal. Will's thoughts are drawn to the message from the winged Daniel of his inferno.

All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

Will thinks that about sums up his day.

Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal reflects on his conversation with Will as he drives back to Impruneta and Lucia. Things get a bit hot in the basement between Will and Daniel. Daniel keeps his canine therapy session with Du Maurier. Will receives a call from D'Angelo while Hannibal talks with Roberta. And no tableau would be complete without a conversation with Hannibal.
>
> "Have you put on your Hannibal suit to make this or is this…you?"
>
> Daniel gestures at Will, eyes drawn to the blade of the cleaver that catches the glare of the bulb hanging overhead.
>
> Will thinks Daniel must still be high to confront him like this, while he is holding…this. Will sets down the cleaver and wipes his hands with the damp towel that hangs over one shoulder. He lets the towel slip onto the table and crosses the room to Daniel. He slams Daniel against the wall, not painfully, but the look on Daniel's face confirms Will has his complete attention.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 60

Hannibal reflects on his conversation with Will as he drives back to Impruneta and Lucia. Things get a bit hot in the basement between Will and Daniel. Daniel keeps his canine therapy session with Du Maurier. Will receives a call from D'Angelo while Hannibal talks with Robera. And no tableau would be complete without a conversation with Hannibal.

Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Roberto Ferri

Hannibal guides the dark green Volvo off road and parks beneath the canopy of fig trees lining the secluded and dusty asphalt country road that twists around the Tuscan orchards and farms several miles from the main highway. He tugs the plastic liners from between the cushions of the front seats, liners smudged with DNA laden oil and sweat from his body and from Luciano's. He rolls them up tightly, securing them with rubber bands he pulls from the front pocket of his trousers.

He pops the trunk and removes the knapsack that contains the black body suit he had worn in Fiesole and stuffs the plastic inside. He checks the trunk once more out of seasoned habit, eyes trailing along the supplies he leaves for Will should Will desire to avail himself of them.

Hannibal's tongue pokes at the inside of his cheek as the smile provoked by his encounter with Will spreads across his face, refusing to disappear completely. Exchanging and trading in each other's thoughts like mental currency leaves him hungering for more.

Hearing eagerness billeted beneath resignation in Will's words had been gratifying but Hannibal knows lies from Will's lips taste just as sweet as truth. Hannibal has been seduced by those lips before and his mouth still bears the taint of their betrayal.

Betrayal cloaked in ideals, ill-fitting frocks pulled from a closet of despoiled innocence, too ragged and sullied to wear though Will still tries to slip them on and make them fit. So infuriating…

Hannibal begins to wipe down the dash, steering wheel, and doors in his compulsive thoroughness. He had worn gloves the entire time he had been in the car with the doomed Luciano, but to leave the vehicle without giving it a once over would be unthinkable.

Choosing a Volvo had not been incidental on Hannibal's part. Should Will choose to avail himself of Hannibal's largess he will appreciate the sentiment in selecting a vehicle that resembles the one he used to leave ensconced in Hannibal's drive behind the kitchen in Baltimore. The car is at once a token of affection tarnished perhaps, but unparalleled, and the car functions as an extension of erstwhile utility. Hannibal has filled the trunk with rolls of plastic and a well packed tool box filled with an assortment of tapes, measures, and other sundries no discerning killer could do without.

Hannibal glances toward a clearing not far from the Volvo. His black and silver Ducati Monster sits secluded under the fig trees, the chrome barely discernable from this distance. The rest of the ride back to Impruneta should be invigorating.

He will call Will to inquire exactly where he plans on depositing his masterpiece this time. Hannibal will require a brief visit to the location to retrieve the requisite evidence linking the two tableaux before he completes his own. Will cannot and should not be the one to do it. Will's surprise at learning of it should be genuine in front of Uncle Jack. They will most certainly find Hannibal's tableau first unless Will finds an even more public place to place his.

Hannibal imagines teeth raking at tender lips, Will's outward expression thoughtful as Jack gazes at him coldly when the location for the second tableau is revealed in the first. The thought elicits rumbling deep in his throat. Hannibal's breath hitches as he chides himself for the unbidden protectiveness that surfaces still where his fledgling cub is concerned. Will will be surrounded not only by Greeks, but by the well-armed Italians policing the provinces, the Romans and Etruscans as it were. Uncle Jack will not be the only badge with which Will will have to contend.

Patroclus' feet tread foreign soil and there is the viper waiting her chance to strike as well.

The anticipation is palpable; Hannibal's mouth is wet with it. He also relishes his return to Impruneta for the lovely and also doomed Lucia. Hannibal's intentions regarding his own tableau reflect his penchant for the poetic irony Will knows well and this time, the added classical allusion Will should find perfectly apropos.

Hannibal can imagine the consternation painted across what remains of Mason's face as Jack or Will, or both of them, explain to him the tableaux. Hannibal doubts Mason's peculiar proclivities endow him with the inclination to stick the knife any more deeply than to test the thickness of the skin, either actual flesh or corpus of literature. Despite Mason's wealth, he remains vulgar and in Hannibal's estimation bereft of any redeeming value.

Will's tableau should prove equally provocative and Hannibal's blood quickens as he thinks how exhilarating it is to await the unveiling. There is a curious sort of joy, an invocation of the divine in the pure and primal love Will engenders. Purity arising transformed from bitter ashes to shine its incandescent light. Light that Hannibal basks in now.

Hannibal remembers a sonnet from La Vita Nuova, this particular sonnet had played in his head while visiting Will in BSHCI for the first time. The prose sung by ethereal voices had filled his mind as he had walked along the dank corridor toward Will's cell. Looking into Will's eyes as Will had greeted him standing defiant on the other side of the bars; Hannibal had felt like the smitten Dante watching his lover eat his heart.

Hello, Doctor Lecter…

Will could not have known the sacrifice Hannibal had made sending him there, the pagan poet caught in the flames of hell, Hannibal had felt the rending of Will's pure heart as though it had been his own, pierced for Hannibal's sins. Only Will possesses the sensitivity, the empathy, to understand the absolute purity of Hannibal's love.

Certainly for Will, understanding that love had given rise to fear; so much fear that Will had not recognized it for what it was until he had found himself clinging to life on Hannibal's kitchen floor. Then as now, he still fears that love and the shades of death always hovering beside the fear of loss. Will is learning how to manage his anticipation of regret. Regret at his own loss of innocence, and Hannibal imagines, regret over the loss of Clayton's. Because of his gift, fear has always been Will's constant companion

Hannibal has wrestled with regret and finds his opponent a most difficult adversary. He wonders if he should tell Will it was the anticipation of regret that had guided his hands that night in the kitchen. Anticipation of regret so raw it would tighten around his throat and choke him, and Hannibal had feared it would strangle him. The wound Will has left upon his heart is enough.

Perhaps, someday he will tell him.

Impulses can be controlled with restraint and conquered with obedience.

Will has yet to accept his inspirations for what they are. Obeying his nature will free him from his inferno unless Will does not desire to be free. So unpredictable, his Will.

Hannibal understands that there are other emotions; other impulses at war within Will that cry out to be controlled. Affection for Clayton tugs at him, but the thing that truly rivals Hannibal for Will's heart is Will's misplaced sense of right and wrong, good and evil. The mirrors in his mind reflect the beliefs of everyone around him, a relentless river of reinforcement raging through his consciousness.

As Hannibal slips on his jacket for the ride, he replays their conversation, paying close attention to every word exchanged; seeking insight from the inflection in the voice he knows so well, the voice he has heard in his mind every day for the past year. Will had agreed to be honest and Hannibal believes he had been, but sins of omission remain between them. There is meaning in what Will did not say, significance couched in the pauses, and implications buried in the deliberate articulations. Will never says anything he does not mean to say, but his intentions are often compromised by his empathy.

And therein lies the truth.

Everything I have done was only ever about doing what I thought best for both of us.

Hannibal knows Will believes his intentions good, if not imperfectly righteous. The statement is consistent with everything about Will, despite the mocking tone. Will is constantly adjusting and readjusting his thinking to align with his beliefs and as he opens his eyes to who he is, the more difficult it is for him to see himself aligned with his beliefs. If he cannot reconcile these concepts in his mind, he will twist away in his inferno. He will twist until he can bear it no longer and then he will believe the only way out is to sacrifice himself.

Can't wait to see yours.

Of course Will wants to see it. He is thrilled at the very idea. The part of Will that Hannibal awakened did not sink quietly into slumber, nor did it bleed out on his kitchen floor. This design ensures that Will has as much to lose as Hannibal. Unless, Will intends to play them all so he can martyr himself in a singular act of hoped for absolution. Hannibal knows it is within Will to seek redemption for his believed sins. The question remains whether Will intends to seek redemption from Hannibal, the FBI, or himself. He would not put it past Will to embed a design of his own within Hannibal's design. So infuriating…

Sometimes all we can do is watch.

Du Maurier's cynicism will be her undoing. Achilles will have his Patroclus if he must raze Troy a thousand times. He will have him if he must stay Patroclus' own hand to do it. Will has committed no sin except for his betrayal in Baltimore. He has already suffered his punishment for that and been forgiven.

Hannibal peers into the darkened road ahead of him and thinks Will sees only darkness as well. Hannibal knows Will has not forgiven him. Knows it as surely as the wound in his chest throbs with regret. Will cannot forgive Hannibal because he cannot forgive himself. He would rather burn in his inferno, torment himself rather than embrace who he has become.

Will has condemned Hannibal to join him in his inferno. As Will suffers, so does Hannibal. Will's backhanded punishment. Hannibal almost laughs aloud as thoughts collide. Will withholds the forgiveness Hannibal seeks to punish him, knowing that what injures Achilles also injures Patroclus, but the reverse is also true. Hannibal punishes himself as he wallows in his pit of regret, picking at his wound because in sealing it up and allowing it to heal; he would have nothing left of Will at all.

For what sin is Will punishing him for?

Unless they can bridge this chasm between them, Hannibal knows they will never extend their universe beyond the confines of his salon. The salon is gone. Baltimore is gone. Hannibal's thoughts fall like droplets of rain until they form a running stream, a stream Hannibal would like to fill again…with trout.

Will would not be twisting in his inferno if he could accept that body and soul, good and evil, are not separate and God does not torment his creation for indulging one over the other. Often pathetic creature that he is, God's creation punishes himself without any help from his almighty deity. God created good and evil and his creation is free to indulge either and both at his pleasure. Indeed, Hannibal muses as he secures his knapsack to his black Ducati, both Christ and Satan had once sat beside God, and God had loved them both.

For Hannibal, Christ and Satan are interchangeable, archangel and messiah, and which was cast out of heaven depends on one's point of view. Will's fear, his anticipation of regret may impel him to commit an act of redemption rather than accept fear and regret as part of becoming.

Hannibal hopes that Will's radiance this evening holds the portent of comet, not blazing meteor.

Will has placed Clayton in an unenviable and awkward position. As his therapist, Clayton is bound by confidentiality although Hannibal suspects Clayton requires very little, if any, motivation to keep Will's secrets. Will has shared forbidden fruit with him, has sewn seeds in trusted and fertile ground. An act of creation that will have its destructive consequence.

Hannibal considers Clayton's many assets, assets he himself has found agreeable enough. As Hannibal had cared for the unconscious Clayton at Du Maurier's guest house, he had not dreamed the life he held in his hands would be his to bestow or take again so soon. For now, Hannibal is content to leave Will's supports in place though the death knell raps. Faintly, ever so faintly it raps. Until the rapping becomes thunder in Will's chest.

If Will's state of mind after taking Tier apart was any indication, Clayton will have his hands full… of Will. A slight tic twinges at Hannibal's eye as he thinks of the aftermath of Tier and the lost weekend he had shared with Will, and the envy salts a wound sore and ravenous for reconciliation. Clayton will be the one entertaining Will's angelic demon now that he has let it out.

Hannibal does not tarry by the side of the road. He has noted the mile markers so he can relay to Will the location of the vehicle. He thinks Clayton may have some reservation about using his claret colored Mercedes to transport the macabre monument. Will had brought Tier to Hannibal's home in his own car, had been in control of his resources. Watching Will scramble to please him is its own reward, but Hannibal will not have Will's vision compromised by lack of autonomy. Will will want to keep Clayton's hands clean and Hannibal concurs. Will will require a sterling alibi.

Hannibal drops the keys in a small magnetic box and attaches it to the metal underside of the rear bumper. He has another fifteen minutes' ride before reaching his villa having left the Volvo at a nearly half way point between Impruneta and Fiesole. He climbs atop the Ducati and speeds off down the darkened back roads, wind whipping brown locks across his sun kissed face.

He wonders if Will will be able to pick him out among the warm bodies circling his murder tableaux once law enforcement descends upon it. Hannibal's altered appearance affords him some camouflage, some anonymity. Hannibal should be able to navigate his way around the crime scene without drawing much attention. There will be all kinds of people there; the site will be teaming with the local police, the FBI, Interpol, and reporters. Not to mention the curious.

Hannibal already has a bag packed, complete with binoculars.

As he weaves the bike along the road toward the main highway, Hannibal's' thoughts turn to Will, specifically his performance on the phone this evening. Though his hair and clothes had been in disarray from the struggle with Luciano, Will's tone and body language had been perfect. His head had alternately bowed in contrition or shame, or lifted in a show of defiance. Both affectations carefully calibrated to align with equally crafted responses. The intermittent pacing had seemed both predatory and petulant. Will has done this before and done it well. Or, Will's mannerisms had been genuine, accurate reflections of his conflicted soul.

Images of the fight send another tug to his lips. It had been a first to watch Will indulging his instincts; a sight Hannibal looks forward to seeing more of, as Hannibal expects they will. But Will's words and attitude on the patio had hit every note Hannibal had hoped for. The same disconcerting dilemma arises for Hannibal. Had he seen and heard a creation of empathic design or had he seen and heard Will?

Will had admitted to Hannibal after killing Hobbs that imagining someone else killing had become more difficult for him. Killing Hobbs had provided Will with a previously untapped frame of reference. His own experience leaked into his imagination, leaving its own imprint. When Will had resumed his therapy, his intention had been to trap Hannibal and he had used his imagination to create a mirror image of Hannibal in himself.

Hannibal reasons that it must be just as difficult for him to separate the mirror he created from self afterward. Hannibal's act of destruction had disrupted Will's transformation, but he has continued to adapt, evolve, and become. This joint venture will reveal to Hannibal just how much. Becoming Hannibal was part of his becoming. Therefore, it is likely difficult if not impossible for Will to separate the residue of the mirror from the Will who had awakened in the hospital after his baptism of blood in the kitchen.

Despite Uncle Jack's unimpressive grasp of Will's gift, Hannibal thinks Jack understands more than he lets on. Hannibal had certainly explained plenty to him about Will and his gift while staring into Jack's large unblinking brown eyes when Will had been suffering from encephalitis under his exclusive care. Enough for Jack to believe a killer lurked inside his unsociable and testy profiler. Jack is counting on the inner turmoil to make the bait tastier as he throws Will back to Hannibal.

If Hannibal thinks Jack is setting Will up, the thought has also occurred to Will. Jack is already expecting Will's complicity in whatever death tableaux turn up. Will had needed Jack to know Tier's killer. His carefully delivered comments at Tier's crime scene had conveyed that. This time, Will's comments will be deliberate misdirection and Jack will be expecting misdirection. Will knows this. Hannibal wonders if Jack knows that Will knows.

Jack could live with the regret of losing Will to catch Hannibal. He has written Will off before. A second time would be much easier. Will is truly alone. Even his association with Clayton, no matter how intimate, cannot endure the breach of universes that Hannibal's invitation has introduced. And while Will is equipped to handle chaos, Clayton is not. Neither is Jack.

Jack would like to be the man who catches Hannibal. His efforts to catch him so far have seen the loss of his wife and the near ruination of his career. Jack wants vindication. He has nothing left but to catch Hannibal. Hannibal decides that Jack will keep his own counsel. He will listen, but Jack is through with entertaining anyone's ideas other than his own. It is possible then, that Uncle Jack can be convinced to cut his losses and go home should he be presented with an open and shut case for Hannibal's demise.

Will did not come to Florence to kill Hannibal. But dying may be just what Hannibal needs to do.

Hannibal cannot forget that Du Maurier brings her own pieces to the board. She will no doubt press Clayton for information. She expects to see him tomorrow with his therapy dogs. Hannibal may have to set aside some time from his busy weekend for her.

As he pulls up to his villa Hannibal imagines the pug nosed Lucia looking anxiously around the dim confines of the guest room, listening for signs of her brother's return so the family can be contacted to negotiate their release. Fortunately, she will not have to live with her disappointment for long.

* * *

Daniel watches Will from the top of the stairs. Cara and Bella yawn at him from where they lay on the rug. The mantle clock reads a little after four and Daniel frowns at its cracked face and consoles himself that at least his heirloom from back home was not completely broken in the fracas. He has tidied up his living room, a necessary if not emotionally taxing activity and the task had occupied his mind, for a little while.

He had awakened from troubling dreams, variations on the reality that had assaulted his home and his person earlier. He has not taken any more medication. He is still somewhat numbed, he can't feel the pain when he moves, not much anyway, and he can't seem to find the meds. He glances beneath his shirt and is relieved to find no seepage along the bandages Will applied as well as any boy scout.

He watches the deceptively sweet looking boy scout below as he chops at the dismembered pieces of their assailant. The picnic table will have to be trashed. Even if it survives Will's battering, he could never use it again without remembering this. Besides, explaining the numerous gashes would require a lot of embellishment. As he glances around the basement from his perch the realization that there is no place in his home left untainted by Will unravels like a ball of string to roll around his mind.

He kicks the ball of string away and descends the stairs after clicking on some music. Will's head turns to the stairs at the sound. Pachelbel's Canon in D queues up. Daniel feels the swell of emotions from Will thrumming in his chest, emotions that collide with his own as the sounds of the soaring violins from above fail to deliver the sought after solace.

"Daniel! You don't want to be down here." Will frowns, "And, you don't need to put on any music. Certainly, not…that."

"Why not?"

Daniel continues to walk down the stairs. He stops at the last step and places both of his bare feet on the cold cement with pointed deliberation.

"Listening to Brandenburg concertos in your head?" Daniel asks.

"Daniel…" Will starts, prickling at the stark insinuation. He prickles not because it is stark, but because it is true.

Daniel hears the warning in Will's voice and ignores it. He knows what killing and creating does to Will. Will has not only told him, Will's emotions are on display every bit as much as the select chunks of raw rigid flesh strewn across the picnic table.

"I'm partial to number four. Which is your favorite, or um…maybe I should ask which one is Hannibal's favorite."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

Will rubs at his eyes. He does not want to have this, or any conversation with Daniel right now. His mind is aflame with unspoken desires that flare with every breath Daniel takes.

"Not at all." Daniel's green eyes flash, "Your associations are only one of the multifaceted issues being addressed in your therapy."

"I give you permission to stop being my therapist for a little while. In fact, I insist."

"Impossible, I'm afraid. Especially since Hannibal is countering my therapy with his own. And that is what he is doing, isn't it? Offering a second opinion…at least alternate therapy?"

"Stop it. You said you would help. This is helping?"

"Isn't it? You seem to be responding well to Hannibal's field theory. Hannibal is very aware of your awareness. He's relying on behaviorism to supplement your experience in the now by saturating it with the residue of your past."

"It would seem I am immersed in residue…yes."

Will thinks fleetingly that he is saturated with therapy. Dropping paddles and anchor to drift on the open sea suddenly sounds appealing.

“Have you put on your Hannibal suit to make this or is this…you?”

Daniel gestures at Will, eyes drawn to the blade of the cleaver that catches the glare of the bulb hanging overhead.

Will thinks Daniel must still be high to confront him like this, while he is holding…this. Will sets down the cleaver and wipes his hands with the damp towel that hangs over one shoulder. He lets the towel slip onto the table and crosses the room to Daniel. He slams Daniel against the wall, not painfully, but the look on Daniel’s face confirms Will has his complete attention.

“Go back upstairs, Daniel. You aren’t yourself, and this…isn’t the help I need.”

“Do you lie for me, or for you?”

Daniel feels the cool stone at his back as he shifts between the wall and Will. He holds Will in his gaze and grins at him. He licks his lips in response to the heat emanating from the taut and perspiring body pinning him in place as much as the scent of blood in the air. His senses tingle, nerves scream beneath his skin, and his cock thickens inside his boxers, the tightness of the fabric between his legs rubs pleasantly as he grinds against Will.

Will realizes Daniel is mirroring his emotions, his shield unable to function, dulled by the opiates that pulse through Daniel if his dilated pupils are any indication. The tense limbs and erect cock pressing against Will’s legs confirm Daniel’s shield is the only thing dulled by the meds. Seeing Daniel like this is like seeing a reflection.

Daniel wants Will to make new associations, even now, especially now as Will recreates a scene from his past with Hannibal in *his* basement. While Will relives his experiences in his mind, Daniel wants to impact the present with his own imprint.

…I will not go quietly into the night, Will.

As if reading his thoughts, Daniel leans in to press soft lips into his hair, to hum into an ear attuned to the music above and the beating of the heart against his own.

“I feel what you feel. I know what you want…” Daniel rasps softly, fingers coiling around tempting curls.

“I can’t help the associations…” Will rasps just as softly. Need twists dark and ugly inside, as temptation beckons below.

“…we’ll make new ones.” Daniel says, scraping teeth along Will’s throat.

Daniel spreads his legs wider to catch muscular thighs in an embrace, stubbornly taunting Will and rolls his head back exposing his throat as Will crushes him flush with the wall pressing his lips to Daniel’s jugular. That awful relentless need of Will’s, desperate and hot washes over him. He drags his open mouth across Will’s cheek, draws Will’s tongue inside and flinches with delight as the sucking sends Will trembling, breath warm and moist on his skin.

The terrible aching need wells inside and Will surrenders to it. Daniel tastes so sweet; Will imagines ripened slices of peach, fresh berries on his tongue and the smell of surf and sweat on a summer’s day so real that Will curls his toes in the sand at his feet.

As Will’s whiskers scrape across his face Daniel unbuttons his shorts and unzips the fly. Fingers tug at belt loops and Will’s teeth now hold his tongue as sparks detonate behind his eyes. He grinds against Will, as Will reaches his hand inside his boxers to cup his balls.

“Yessss” Daniel whispers, the single syllable drawn out seductively into a kiss. Tiny hairs rise along Will’s neck as he returns the kiss.

“Not here. We’ll contaminate…the…uh…ohhh…”

Daniel reaches between Will’s legs, grabs the swollen pouch nestled there and squeezes causing Will to yelp in surprise. He wriggles and Will lets him go to stumble up the stairs following right behind him.

In the kitchen, Will straddles him against the basement door, mouth at his neck then collarbone. Daniel grabs a handful of hair and with the other steadies himself, hips rubbing up and down so that fabric pulls maddeningly taut between them.

Will winces as his head is abruptly pushed down Daniel’s chest then stomach. Will’s face slides over the tee and bandages and he fumbles with the shorts to wrest them free, his breath warm against damp boxers as Daniel curls his fingers more tightly around the fistful of hair he uses to shove Will’s face against the rigid flesh concealed under thin cotton.

Will kneels in front, breathing through his mouth, face flushed wickedly, tugging at the boxers so they too lie at Daniel’s feet. Even in the darkness Will looks ravishing on the floor beneath him, a tightly coiled mass of muscle and curls, every breath blows close and hot to tingle upon his excited flesh.

Will wants this. He needs this. To feel Daniel’s tanned and silken skin against his, to feel soft and supple flesh beneath his chilled fingers, to feel Daniel twitch warm and alive in his mouth. To wallow in life so the nightmares that follow him out of his dreams are dispelled for a moment before the pieces of death scattered cold and stiff downstairs become part of him once again.

As Will’s fingers free him from the constraining fabric Daniel hisses at the contact, moans with pleasure as Will draws him in his mouth as both his hands contract compulsively, possessively around the soft curls twining about his fingers. His clothes pool at his feet and Daniel impatiently kicks them out of his way. Will is bobbing his head furiously, taking the length in and out as Daniel braces himself against the door in the predawn light.

He sees the tears leak from wet lashes as Will grunts with every thrust, struggling against the hardened flesh that prods at the back of his throat, and feels his own throat constrict.

“Suck on it.” He pleads between clenched teeth.

Will obliges, deftly stabbing the slit with his tongue as he draws the tip between his lips. The sensation is delicious, and Will feels Daniel’s entire body shudder against the door as the luscious ripple sucking always brings courses through Will’s limbs, his legs like rubber as he sinks into the floor.

Will feels Daniel is close, tastes it salty sweet upon his tongue and he pulls back letting the thick cock slip from his mouth. Daniel flinches as cold air replaces the slick warmth of Will’s throat.

“Finish it…oh fuck…please don’t stop now…”Daniel whines as he looks down into Will’s upturned face.

“I want you to fuck me.” Will says wiping his lips. “Hard…over the table.”

Daniel cannot rip Will’s clothes from him quickly enough. Grabbing a bottle of olive oil from the counter still cluttered with the remains of their forgotten dinner, he bends Will over the kitchen table, shoving everything off with a sweep of his arm, as the dogs scatter off the rug behind them alarmed and curious until Daniel hears them whine and stretch along the kitchen floor. He pours the aromatic oil into his palm and slathers his hands until they shine.

He runs his oiled hands over tense muscle, fingers massaging the knotted flesh as Will flexes and stretches along the length of the table, ass cheeks bumping provocatively as his cock throbs with every bounce. He leans over Will, carelessly smearing bandages with the shiny oil and drizzles more into the crack of Will’s ass smiling as he shudders with the cold.

He shoves two, then three fingers inside in quick succession, knowing Will wants it provided he can hold on long enough to give him what he wants. Will twists with the curling of fingers and gasps as Daniel replaces the fingers with his slicked cock, penetrating slowly until Daniel feels the resistance pop inside and he begins to buck forcefully slamming Will into the table as Will grasps at the table’s edges, knuckles white and face to the side in a beautiful grimace.

“Punishment or reward?” Daniel asks between thrusts.

“For which…deed?” Will hisses into the wood at his lips.

“Can’t decide good or bad?”

“Fuck…Daniel…are we talking about killing?”

The sounds of Paganini swell in Will’s ears, the notes of the cello resonating deep and low as he writhes along the table, pinned in complete surrender to his urges.

“If killing feels good to God…“ Daniel says as he slicks Will’s cock between his slippery fingers, “…can you imagine what fucking must feel like?”

Will groans. He can’t even manage a response; his attention is focused on the fingers mercilessly teasing his foreskin.

Daniel clenches his fist in Will’s hair, painful tugs that cause Will to cry out. Daniel remembers whining in similar pain and delight as he had writhed beneath Will during his hallucinations face down in a pillow to smother his sobs, and he twists the curls between his fingers more tightly so Will has to lift his head from the table, still rasping and groaning. The friction builds warm and wet, Daniel’s panting comes ragged and shallow as his cock dives deeper ripping wildly into bowels that quiver, slick with heat and want.

“Doing bad things to bad people does feel good.” He hums into Will’s ear.

“Are we having…therapy…” Will grunts as Daniel’s balls slap against his ass, “…or sex?”

“Yes.”

Daniel pounds into Will for all he's worth, hands gripping hips as he drills and twists, pummeling Will into the table so he can't move except to receive the pounding Daniel is dishing out. His arms are stretched across the table, marring the polished wood with streaks of sweat and his fingers are cramped around the table's edge but he dares not let go.

Will's cock bounces between his legs, thumping against flesh pressed to wood and the throbbing pressure mounts deliciously as he squirms beneath Daniel's weight. His body trembles with the gush of fluid erupting inside and he feels warm slender fingers wrap around his cock, tip angry red as his body convulses with the touch, spurting hot into the hand that cradles it.

Daniel collapses on top for a moment, lost in the near incapacitating shudders that follow, his mind spinning as his body absorbs the tingles of pleasure exploding throughout his body. Will shakes beneath him as pleasure cascades through nerves jangling with sensation until, finally, Daniel slides off and he can draw himself up from the table.

Will pushes himself up and off the table, wipes at the drool that glistens all over his face. Awareness of shame quickly follows and Will bites at trembling lips as heat consumes him, and cheeks flush uncomfortably warm beneath Daniel's steady gaze.

Daniel stares into the blissed out blue eyes, notes the lank curls plastered against his head, and the limp smile that spreads helpless across Will's reddened face. He wipes sticky fingers across his bandage, and grimaces as pain registers faintly. He points to the bandages.

"Too bad I stopped billing Mason. I should get hazard pay."

"So should I. That was um…some really unconventional therapy." Will looks down at his feet, at the smattering of red droplets staining toes and ankles. Blood splatter clings to hair and skin all the way up his legs. Will shrugs it off, feels his composure returning. He feels the predator stretching inside him, primal and possessive as he looks at Daniel. *Mine…*

"Aren't you reinforcing the wrong associations?" Will says ignoring Hannibal's voice in his head.

"Associations are only part of it. I'm aware that I'm affected by you and there's not much I can do about that except to leave, but it's my house and I'm not going to throw you out, so…" Daniel pauses, leaves the thought unfinished and ruffles fingers through his damp locks, "but you…still wrestle with labels."

"Labels?"

"Good and evil. What happened between us just now? Was that good or evil? Right or wrong?"

"That's not a fair comparison."

"Just as fair as smoking or any other metaphor I've used along the way. What you aren't seeing, or aren't accepting in your universe, in your inferno…is that both are always present."

"Good and evil define heaven and hell."

"In Dante's *Inferno*; not yours. Yours and Hannibal's. He sees good and evil as seasoning, shakes them like salt and pepper over the pot, stirs it around and serves it up without a second thought."

“Speaking of metaphors, yours are getting worse” Will says, becoming vaguely uncomfortable standing around nude in the kitchen.

“Think so? I thought cooking and Hannibal…” Daniel shrugs as Will waves him off.

“Hannibal doesn’t see good or evil. He insists God doesn’t either.” Will says.

“Did God create man, or did man create God? Either way, Hannibal wins. Religion is a means to an end for him. Like the concept of God, Hannibal is beyond comprehension.”

Will blinks as associations fire off quickly. Hannibal does not believe in God. He appreciates the concept and his understanding of the concept has caused him to question the accepted notions of deity held by normative society, the society that excludes him and which he in turn, excludes. Hannibal has gone beyond questioning straight to outright rejection.

Hannibal does not measure his deeds on a yardstick of good and evil, rather he takes the concept of creation very literally.

Killing must feel good to God too - he does it all the time. And are we not created in his image?

If God created man in his own image; therein lies the expectation, Hannibal’s expectation, that his creation…become as God is. Hannibal does win. Doesn’t he always? Will thinks as he looks around the kitchen for his clothes. Spies them on the floor and decides maybe a shower would be a good idea before returning to the depths of hell downstairs.

“I have recognized my inspirations for what they are. Made them flesh and blood, haven’t I?” Will says, walking over to the fridge. He grabs a bottle of water and tosses one to Daniel.

“Are you angry at yourself for indulging your instincts?” Daniel catches the bottle and cracks it open.

Will doesn’t answer, he merely gazes back, and Daniel watches pale blue eyes turn to steel. He takes a gulp of water.

“Are you going to stop?” Daniel asks.

Will shakes his head ever so slightly.

“Associations come quickly, don’t they?”

So did forts. Will thinks, *But not anymore…*

Daniel gestures at the basement door. “How much longer are you going to be down there? You still haven’t told me exactly what you are going to do.”

Will thinks of up and down. Body and spirit. Heaven and hell. He imagines a misted horizon at the far edge of a churning sea, the point where ocean meets sky indistinguishable, obscured in a sfumato-like haze that descends around him like…smoke. Like the horizon in his imagination, Hannibal has married the concepts of good and evil, heaven and hell. He blinks away the smoldering landscape that threatens to crash through the wall of Daniel’s kitchen.

“I said I’d explain, but maybe it would be better that you don’t know. Oh, and um…Jack is going to need you to sign off on me.”

“Sign off on you? As in write a letter attesting to your mental stability?”

“Something like that. You remember who Purnell is?”

“Shit. She knows you are here and wants Crawford to cover her ass.”

“Yeah. She really doesn’t like me.”

“She just doesn’t know you.” Daniel scratches at his chin and gives Will a taunting raise of a brow, “Sure, I’ll compose something that confirms you are relatively…sane. When does Crawford need it?”

“When he gets here…which he thinks will be early next week. I think maybe sooner.”

The dry tone is accompanied by lips drawn in a thin line and a roll of tired pale blue eyes. It is an expression Will wears often and the dull expression is usually amusing but not today.

“Shit!” Daniel says as he remembers his session with Lydia for tomorrow. He corrects himself. It is already Saturday. As if he needed one more thing on his plate. Daniel rubs at his neck, tension already collecting at the thought of therapy, Lydia, and the perplexing Dumont.

“What?”

“I’ll have to cancel my canine therapy session today. It’s not until later in the afternoon, I have time.”

“I think you should keep it. Keep up appearances.”

“Will, I can’t. This is…almost too much.”

“All the more reason to get out and do something normal. For you. And for me. Your behavior will reflect on me. What reason would you give to cancel? It would have to be pretty compelling. You can’t appear to be erratic or upset if Jack or anyone else wants to talk to you.”

Daniel takes a shaky breath. Will is right. The FBI will check him out if they haven’t already. Good thing he has no skeletons in his closet. Yet.

“Okay. I see your point. This is surreal.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So, what’s the fish tank for?”

Will sighs and purses his lips. “It’s not a fish tank. It’s a terrarium.”

“Tomato – tomah..to.” Daniel says as he tilts the bottle to his lips.

“You like Picasso?” Will says as Daniel spews water like a fountain.

The Teatro Romano looms in the distance, its uppermost tier visible along the crest of the hill above her and Du Maurier thinks she has never actually walked down the other side of the hill to place even one well-heeled shoe upon its ancient stones. How easily one can take for granted those things one sees every day. Du Maurier thinks perhaps she might persuade Clayton to walk with her once the chauffeur returns to the Museum's parking lot for Lydia.

He wears a button down short sleeved shirt with pressed trousers and he has smoothed the unruly curls with a smattering of gel. His appearance is sleek and professional but there is something off about him she thinks as she observes him standing with arms folded across his chest.

She had thought he might bring Graham to tag along since Clayton lives but a short distance from the park, but Graham is evidently either indisposed or disinclined to join his therapist in the park. Then again, Clayton may desire to keep the rest of his professional life separated from his personal life despite mixing them up by his association with Graham.

An association that has perhaps soured. They may look alike, but Du Maurier thinks their association like oil and vinegar, an uneasy blend of ingredients too disparate in nature to remain in close contact indefinitely.

She watches Clayton with Lydia and the dogs. He has been trying to engage her in a game the dogs know and enjoy. Lydia's attention span can be measured in fractions of seconds. The barking of the dogs snaps Clayton to action and he draws another ball from the bag lying at his feet. Lydia has apparently managed to lose the first. He tosses the bright yellow ball to Lydia, who promptly moves aside to let it fall into the lush grass. The dogs lie down among the blades of green as Clayton explains, again, the game they are to play.

He is attentive as always, but the smiles are not genuine today she thinks; rather they are practiced smiles passed off to reassure, a mask that moves but conceals nonetheless. Du Maurier recognizes a mask when she sees one. She looks at one every morning in the mirror.

She wonders what Clayton could be concealing today.

She smiles warmly at him as he leaves Lydia to play with the dogs on her own a while. Clayton's patience seems in short supply. Lydia tosses a Frisbee now, not well, but the dogs faithfully retrieve it for her and she coos over them. She turns to wave at Du Maurier as she throws the neon blue disc into the grass again. Du Maurier had been surprised to learn dogs are color blind to red and green, and often run right over a red toy in green grass.

She waves back at Lydia, smiling encouragement.

"She really enjoys this, Daniel." Du Maurier says his name with affection and, seeing no discernable reproach from him, is encouraged. "Looking forward to it motivates her to stay sober during the week."

"You made the therapy conditional?" Daniel says, clearly piqued.

"Of course. She self-medicates. She abuses any substance she can get her hands on."

"Extrinsic motivation doesn't last. It is usually linked to something temporary or that something the patient will eventually lose interest in."

"Perhaps. Perhaps, not. Extrinsic motivation can become intrinsic. Isn't that the idea here?"

“Yes and no. You’ve altered the application, undermined it. The bond with the animal is intrinsic, rooted in the empathy that develops between them. Once that is established, the motivation comes naturally; at least that’s the idea.”

“Perhaps that approach is better suited to patients with grief issues. Lydia is an addict.”

Daniel shrugs and cracks his neck as he looks up at the sky. Judging by the sun, he thinks it about five and his thoughts turn to the nearly assembled monstrosity sitting in his basement and its creator napping in his bed. He doesn’t want to be here, but he sighs and turns to Dumont.

She squints in the bright sunlight, and though she has discarded the sunglasses, her face is cast in perpetual shadow by the huge hat she wears. She has been thankfully quiet most of the afternoon and Daniel has not missed the usual chatter. He thinks his head might explode with the effort of actual conversation. He feels like a ticking time bomb with the banter between them now.

He decides to let Du Maurier have her way on this one. The misapplication of his therapy will, in all likelihood, not make any difference one way or another. Not because Lydia is a hopeless drug addict and substance abuser. Daniel doubts he will remain in Fiesole much longer.

Chances are he will either be arrested for something or lose his license to practice; or both. There is a third option: lose his mind in the process. Will worries about protecting him, and although the danger exists, Daniel thinks that once the tableaux are revealed, his house will be under FBI surveillance. Crawford will almost certainly put eyes on Will’s residence in the event that his cannibal boyfriend pays him a visit.

Another visit, Daniel thinks with a shudder.

“Well, let’s hope you are right about Lydia’s motivation. You know her best.” Daniel says.

Du Maurier is convinced Clayton is mentally someplace else. He should be arguing with her right now. She knew exactly what Clayton’s therapy entailed and she knew what his expectations were. He had rattled off the outline of his proposed therapy for her making it abundantly clear what he wanted.

Du Maurier touches his arm and he jumps slightly at the contact of her fingers along his skin.

“You are distracted today. Do you want to talk about it?”

She allows her gaze to wander about his face, letting him know she is inquiring about the abrasions. They are minor, but obvious. His brows furrow and he bites his lip looking ever more like Graham except for the lack of facial hair. Du Maurier had been taken aback at the sight him as he had greeted her in the parking lot.

A bit of scruff lines his jaw and lips where there had been thick finely trimmed whiskers before. She wonders what had prompted him to shave it off. It is possible whatever it was caused the abrasions as well.

“I’m not comfortable discussing it here.” Daniel says simply. “It’s just personal stuff.”

“If someone is hurting you…”

“He’s not…”Daniel catches himself too late. He *is* distracted and he bites at his cheek, rolls his eyes. He wants to punch something. He knew this was a bad idea.

Du Maurier retains her aura of concern as she smiles inwardly at the slip. Graham. Isn’t it always?

Daniel scrambles to deliver damage control. “It wasn’t intentional. Sometimes I get in my own way.”

He smiles quickly and watches Dumont’s face melt in sympathy. He doesn’t feel any sympathy from her and that troubles him. He’s not sure what he feels from her. She poses quite the enigma. He has never met anyone like her.

Daniel thinks he has very quickly become surrounded by quite a few people unlike anyone else and the idea that it is Will who attracts them persists.

“Is this he you are referring to your roommate?”

“And if he is?”

“Then, it would appear you run the risk of getting in your own way again. How can I help?”

“I don’t think you can though I appreciate the offer.”

“Sometimes just talking through it can help. Without telling me anything, what words spring to mind when you think of him?”

Daniel looks out over the park at the dogs and Lydia as images of Will spill into his mind accompanied by a vast and contradictory slew of adjectives. He turns back to Dumont.

“Cesca…I don’t really want…”

“Do you find yourself making excuses for him, for his behavior? We often rationalize our efforts to help when in fact we enable the very behaviors we seek to address.”

“I didn’t say he was in therapy.”

Du Maurier smiles and Daniel sighs. Psychiatrists are always engaged in therapy. They can’t help themselves. The compulsive analyzing and interference never stops, even when they aren’t at the office. Whether or not his roommate is also his patient does not concern Dumont. She knows it is Daniel’s nature to help, or at least believe he is helping.

“No, but we all have our issues that vary by degree. If he has issues he may or may not be aware of how they are affecting you but the traumatized are often unaware that they are damaged.”

“In this instance, I think he is aware.”

“I was not referring to him.”

Daniel raises a brow but remains quiet. Dumont is provocative, but she makes a good point.

Du Maurier looks into the tired green eyes and knows she has pricked a nerve. Graham is wearing on him, and Clayton’s neck chafes at the noose Graham has hung around it.

“Perhaps it is better to save one’s self when one’s actions - no matter how well intended - can save neither. An awful choice, but sometimes all we can do is watch.”

Daniel stuffs his hands in his pockets as he stares into the distance at nothing in particular. His thoughts are interrupted by the beeping of Dumont’s cell phone. She glances at it and seems surprised. She holds up her index finger and begins to turn away.

“I have to take this. Are you…”

“I’m fine. Go ahead.” Daniel says and walks back toward Lydia and the dogs, grateful for the interruption. His bandages need changing and his head throbs with the persistence of a loud and clanging bell.

Du Maurier waits and then lifts the phone to her lips. “Hannibal. How nice to hear from you.”

“And you as well.” Comes the cheery reply, “Am I interrupting?”

“Canine therapy in the park in Fiesole.”

“Oh? Beautiful day for it. And how is our good doctor this afternoon?”

“Delightful as always, but distracted today.”

“Perhaps you are the distraction.” Hannibal offers, managing to keep the sarcasm to a minimum.

“A compliment?”

“Of course.”

“Hmm. I would like to take the credit but I believe something else, something less innocuous occupies his thoughts. He has suffered a little tumble I’m afraid. There are some minor injuries.”

“Did you inquire about them?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“Inquiries are often more effective when phrased directly, my dear.”

“Often, but not always. Insight becomes elusive if responses to direct inquiry are limited to lies and half-truths.” She chides.

“Those too offer insight. If anything, my conversations with him suggest an admirable tendency toward professionalism and an ability to compartmentalize.”

“I concur. His injuries and distraction are uncharacteristic of what we know of him.”

“Still, he is very emotional isn’t he? Given to impulses and carnal urges. Perhaps his roommate is to blame. Always consider proximity first. I get the sense they are…intimate.”

“I am inclined to agree. Whatever did you talk about your last session with him, to draw that conclusion?”

“Nothing untoward, I assure you. Well, he kept his appointment with you today. It’s probably nothing to worry about.”

“You expect to see him, your usual time Wednesday?”

“Unless something calamitous comes up.”

“Ah…well then, the reason for your delightful call?”

“I was thinking of dinner.”

“Tonight?”

“Not tonight. But soon. Perhaps tomorrow or Monday?”

“Your place or mine?”

“I was hoping to dine out.”

Du Maurier considers this. Dining out for Hannibal means his fridge is empty and it does not matter from where he takes sustenance, excepting the cuisine is exquisite, or he has had his fill of his own cuisine and seeks to clear his palate. There is also the possibility that Hannibal means to appeal to her better nature meaning that he has news to deliver and desires to either celebrate or appease.

Du Maurier thinks Hannibal’s invitation an indication of the latter. She suppresses the urge to inquire about the transfer, satisfied that the transfer is precisely the topic Hannibal intends to introduce at dinner.

“Thoughtful.” She purrs.

Hannibal can well imagine the tasty thoughts running around her head. Du Maurier is predictable, but superbly seductive as she applies her craft. She remains as ever the gift that keeps on giving.

“Do you have a place in mind?” She asks.

“My therapist has encouraged me to get out more. Someplace away from Impruneta or Fiesole would be a refreshing change.”

“If you are leaving the selection to me, I will endeavor to look for a place neither of us has visited.”

“Perfect. You’ll decide on an evening?”

“I’m leaning toward Monday. My weekends are consumed by Lydia here in Fiesole. There are some restaurants in Siena I have been meaning to try.”

“Then I will leave you to your therapy.”

“Ciao, Hannibal.”

Du Maurier checks her watch. Their session is almost over. The seeds she has planted in Clayton’s mind need space and time to sprout. She imagines the sprouts might grow to overtake and choke the blooms already wilting in the soil Graham appears to have poisoned with his acidic personality.

Time to return to the estate. She lifts her gaze from the gold timepiece on her slender wrist to look across the swath of green at Lydia and considers it is also time for a bottle of wine.

Hannibal smiles at the phone before tucking it back in his pocket. He glances across the expanse of his garden and resigns himself to the task that awaits unfinished downstairs. Will expects him to deliver his tableau by dawn tomorrow and Hannibal will not disappoint him.

He remembers lying in bed with Will waiting on Jack's call about Tier. He remembers watching Will awaken in that bed for the first time, well, the first time Will could remember waking in it. Hannibal had always greeted Will with a smile in the morning. Not that greeting him any other way would have been possible. A simple pleasure to look at him twisted up in sheets, pale blue eyes still heavy with sleep. These are stolen moments he cradles as the keepsakes they are.

Will had never returned those smiles. Perhaps someday…

The time for the unveiling of intentions draws near and Hannibal returns inside and gathers his thoughts as he descends the stairs back to the guest room. His conversation with Du Maurier went well. Miraculously, she refrained from inquiring about the transfer. She expects to resume a discussion of that topic over dinner.

Dinner is very likely off the table. Hannibal merely made the suggestion without any intention of actually dining with Du Maurier. The possibility remains should events at the imminent crime scenes drag or the discoveries are made too late to make the evening news. Hannibal had called seeking information on Clayton which Du Maurier was happy to provide.

And why not? She believes him her pawn, not Hannibal's. Clayton seems to be holding his own and Hannibal is impressed with the young doctor's apparent coping skills. Coping with Will is no easy thing. Hannibal does wonder for how much longer Clayton can continue to keep his head above water as Will continues to tie weights to limbs already tired from swimming in Will's sea of madness.

Hannibal switches on the light and commences his work upon the remains of blood and breath that will fuel Will's radiance.

Will shakes himself awake and throws off the sheet, momentarily disoriented. The bright sunlight streaming through the windows jars him fully awake and he glances at the clock on the bureau. He breathes a sigh of relief that he has not slept too long. The relief also comes from knowing the time he spent asleep can be accounted for.

Though his thoughts are saturated with images from his dreamscape, their intrusions are ghosts in his consciousness, disturbances faint like wind upon chimes.

He rolls out of bed and stretches sore muscles that scream for attention after hours of concentrated labor bent over the picnic table in the basement. Except for a couple of short breaks Will has worked non-stop until the one rather satisfying lull. Will smiles at this.

Will thinks he should not be smiling. He exists in a dark place filled with nightmares and mind bending hallucinations. The darkness spills into every aspect of his waking life, a life that feels more dreamlike and surreal than even Will thought possible. His universe is small, dense – a minefield of self-destruction that he has shared with Daniel. He knows Daniel should not be in his universe, but he smiles because he is grateful for the company.

He begins to pull on fresh clothes before going downstairs to raid the fridge. His stomach grumbles as he thinks about reheating the gumbo he put away but never tasted last evening. He reminds himself that it has not even been twenty four hours since Luciano had burst the fragile bubble surrounding the little oasis he had created here.

Before he can take to the stairs his phone rings. He reads the call is not from Daniel who should be returning any time now. Will tries not to unduly rattle himself. The call will probably be disconcerting enough.

"Det…Alia? Hello."

"Ciao, Will. Already calling me detective again?"

"Sorry, force of habit. How are you?"

"Buona, good… I haven't heard from you. It's uh…good to hear your voice."

Will cringes at the small talk and wishes she would get to the point, if there is a point beyond checking up on him as way of assessing her status. As if the lack of contact was not an indication. Will sighs inwardly at his dismissiveness but her timing is really lousy.

"And yours, too. It hasn't been *that* long since we uh, had dinner."

"No, but life gets in the way and before you know it, things get awkward. Are they awkward, Will?"

"A little, but that's on me. I'm…not very good at this."

Alia laughs and the sound of her soft laughter seems to brighten the room a little more.

"What do you mean by this? Picking up a phone once in a while?"

"By this, I mean following up on random acts of intimacy."

Will speaks with more affection than he intended, even so, a smile tugs at lips that press together with uncertainty. The petite dark haired detective has a way of unsettling Will in a way he likes a little too much for his own good. And hers.

"Ah…" she breathes, "Then maybe I overlook your bad habit, eh?"

"I am relieved." Will says.

He is. He is going to see her soon whether he wants to or not. Will begins to walk downstairs as he speaks. He still needs to fix something to eat.

"Well, I did call for a reason. Two reasons actually. Guess who I found?"

Will halts on the steps. "Who?"

"Hercules."

“The cat? From the fire? How did you locate him?”

“Well, none of the shelters had him though plenty of orange tabbies to choose from in those places. So, I had an afternoon off and drove back over to the wreckage. They still have not started on rebuilding and it looks bad there. Invites trouble…abandoned places.”

“Yes, they do.” Will thinks of the destination for Luciano’s tableau and frowns as he listens to Alia.

“Anyway, I see this cat wandering around the burned out palazzo and don’t you know, it’s the Signora’s lost cat. His collar and nametag are still around his neck. Good thing you noticed what his name was, eh?”

“Yeah. So that means he did get out somehow. Before the fire.”

“Are you sure she wouldn’t just let him out to play?”

“He was her constant companion. She never let him out as far as I could tell. What kind of shape was he in?”

“Not good. Thin. Dirty. He ate like a horse when I brought him home.”

“You took him in?”

Will grins. She takes in strays, too. The grin fades and Will bites his lip. No wonder she’s attracted to him.

“Oh, he’s a good boy. I think I’ll keep him. Get him nice and fat. He sleeps with me.”

“Sounds like you’ve traded up.”

“There’s still room for you. He won’t mind.” Alia teases.

Will decides to change the subject before she is no longer teasing. He doubts she is teasing as it is. Hercules’ existence causes Will to reject the idea that the blaze that consumed his former residence was accidental. He knows it is not much to go on, but the feeling in his gut persists.

“What’s the other reason you called?”

“Oh, this reason is not such a happy one.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You know I asked you about the Paolini? Well, I mentioned they had fallen off the radar?”

“Yes. I know. They are still missing.”

“You haven’t heard from them?”

“Nope.”

“Isn’t that odd since they work for you?”

“It’s not good that’s for sure. The FBI now know they were helping me look for the Ripper.”

"And you think they found him?"

"Or he found them."

"Well, their family is looking for you. They know the twins worked for you."

"This is talk at the precinct?"

"It's the rumor floating around. I never told anyone the connection between you. The Paolini have been wagging their tongues. The twins worked for you, but you worked for Mason Verger."

"That's right. I kept his name out of it for several reasons."

"Smart thing to do. Well, this Verger must have shaken the hornets' nest. They want this Ripper, this Lecter you look for and they want you to find him."

"Me?"

"Whatever Verger told them has them convinced you and this Lecter have some history and that if Lecter has the twins, he will come looking for you."

"So use me to get to Lecter," Will rubs his fingers against his lips and thinks everybody wants to join the screw Will Graham party. "Lecter…who they want to kill anyway."

"Verger wants him dead, too. Why?"

"They have some history together. It is an ugly and complicated relationship."

"And you are part of it."

"Yes. I am."

Alia sighs deeply into the phone. "Well, this thing with the twins has the family out for blood. They have hinted at breaking with Verger, you know fuck the business, fuck whatever deal they have."

"But that may be a lie." Roberta says. "Hannibal, my information is only as good as the source and the source is not Paolini. They keep family business close to the vest."

Hannibal sits on his veranda as he speaks with his cousin. The fragrances of the varied vegetable plants and flowers float on the breeze and Hannibal breathes deeply the odors of life from his garden, to replace the odors of death that have filled his nostrils for the last several hours.

"I understand. Mason has been flapping his jaws, or what is left of them."

"*Oui*, *bien sûr*, they want Graham because Mason has told them you do. They intend to use him to bring you out in the open."

"The FBI is already using Will to bait me. Mason knows only whatever Jack Crawford chose to tell him. Either way, the Paolini and the FBI think the murder of the twins will lead them to me."

“Hannibal, the Paolini will let the FBI do what they do. They are not content to sit back and allow Graham to play FBI agent again. They mean to use Graham to bring you to them.”

Hannibal sits up straighter in his chair. “How? They do not know where he resides.”

“The Paolini have learned the value of Graham. To you. It would seem Mason has had enough exposure to the both of you to draw his conclusions without any help from the FBI.”

“Will is in danger. This is personal. Once the investigation starts, the FBI will lead the Paolini to Will. The Paolini will use him to lure me, just like the FBI, but they will kill him.”

“They will kill you both. You first.”

Hannibal thinks Mason very unimaginative to resort to repeating history. He expected something less…mediocre.

“Mason has become a very serious problem.”

“Mason’s leash on the Paolini has snapped.”

“Evidently. He will tell the FBI differently. Otherwise, they have no reason to talk to him.”

Hannibal considers the mess that Mason has served up. Margot would never disclose the details of her brother’s unfortunate accident to him. Mason inferred what he thinks he knows through the haze of his hallucination at Will’s house. Dribbles of dialogue and snatches of images were remembered and cataloged in Mason’s drug soaked mind.

Even so, Mason has remembered enough to understand there is a bond he can exploit. Jack would not have told Mason anything. No one in the FBI would even consider offering classified information to someone like Mason. They might sacrifice Will, but they would not suffer the likes of Mason to interfere with their prime asset.

“Your…Mr. Graham can infer, deduce perhaps, but he cannot know. You cannot know if he knows. *Mais, oui*, I have brought you unhappy news. *Je suis désolé*.”

“You are only the messenger. I can only be grateful you learned of this. On what was their loyalty to Verger based?”

“Verger money of course. The Paolini served the father. Mason inherited them. As I told you, they can be bought for a price. A fact they seem to believe no one knows.”

“Honor for sale. I suppose not.”

“They are ruthless and relentless.”

“As am I.”

“I don’t have the available assets to negotiate with the Paolini, Hannibal.”

“No. But I do.”

Hannibal leans his head against the back of the chair and a wide smile breaks along his lips as the threads of the design he weaves come together. A perfect convergence of destinies flying and swimming in blood. He pours a glass of dark red wine from the bottle left to breathe on the table and closes his eyes as he sniffs the bouquet pressing his lips to the phone.

“Roberta?”

“Oui, Hannibal?”

“Would you be willing to negotiate with the Paolini on my behalf?”

“I would be happy to assist in any way I can. And what of your…*très cher* William?”

Hannibal finds Roberta’s penchant for proper names a quaint habit, most old world. He thinks he has never heard anyone refer to Will using his full name. Roberta has become rather attached to Will considering the way she has come to speak of him. Hannibal’s endorsements notwithstanding, she has no doubt done her own sleuthing and found him compelling if not captivating.

“My…William is not alone. Not anymore.”

There is nothing as relaxing as a soak in the bathtub Daniel decides as he pulls himself out of the water to dry off. He almost feels normal. He almost feels sane.

By the time he had walked Dumont and Lydia back to the parking lot and dropped off the dogs at the kennel it had been nearly seven. He had surprised himself by actually having an appetite and had sunk into a kitchen chair to eat a bowl of gumbo and thick slices of French bread that Will had left out for him. The meal had satisfied, and Daniel had practically inhaled the spicy dish. The bread had been pretty tasty, too. Will knows his way around a kitchen, especially a Cajun kitchen.

It was when Daniel had opened up the fridge to refill his bowl with Will’s delicious gumbo that he realized the reason Will had left his dinner sitting out in the first place. Bag after bag of bloody organs and entrails had been stacked on two of the four shelves. Will had made room by clearing out leftovers and assorted other items Daniel could not even recall as he had stood with his mouth dangling open for several seconds before closing the door to fridge, the second bowl of gumbo forgotten. He had intended to see what Will was up to in the basement, but the zip-lock bags pink and purple had sent him upstairs instead, to pull off sweaty clothes and soak in a tub until his fingers had become waterlogged.

He stands in front of the mirror and does not like what he sees. Aside from the abrasions and the lack of whiskers that still surprises every time he glances at himself, he looks strung out. There is a wildness about his features that was not there before. He thinks he does not look so much like a predator as he does prey.

…the traumatized are often not aware they are damaged.

His relationship with Will is changing him. He knew that he would be affected. His empathy has always presented the challenge of separating his emotions from the emotions of everyone else. He has used his gift to help people. His entire life, his profession has been dedicated to using his gift for the benefit of his patients and plenty of others who have crossed his path.

He thinks of that day at the beach when he almost took that final swim. He thinks of how Will associates him with the ocean, how he senses him as a mist, and how that mist is a comfort.

Will has not mentioned his mist in a long time. Though he uses his gift to gage Will's emotions, Will's gift of empathy works very differently. Will can assume anyone's perspective, essentially become that person. His gift allows him to enter the minds of killers just as easily as anyone else. It occurs to Daniel that if Will wanted to he could just as easily become Daniel, or a version of him. He has done so on occasion already. Their little concerts come to mind.

Daniel may not be feeling Will's actual emotions as often as he thinks he is. He may be feeling his own, magnified and reflected back to him. Not all the time, but anytime Will does not want his true feelings known. Daniel looks away from the mirror and rubs his face. The thought stings.

He is tired and stressed out. He cannot let himself believe Will could be so dishonest with him, so manipulative. That sounds like Hannibal. Daniel swallows the lump in his throat as he wonders just how alike they truly are.

He hears banging around downstairs and then a string of obscenities as Will's voice carries up the stairs. The dogs are barking loudly and Daniel makes his way down the stairs taking two at a time while sliding hands along the bannister. He reaches the bottom to find Will seated on the arm of the couch examining his left elbow.

"What happened?"

"Nearly dropped some…stuff. Didn't break anything but I twisted my arm. I'll be okay in a minute."

"Want some ice?" Daniel checks himself. He has no idea what's in his freezer. He grinds his teeth as looks at Will.

"No." Will says, fatigue evident in every crease in his face. "I'm good. Just have to lug the non-perishables to…your car."

"This sucks more every minute. You know where the keys are." Daniel snaps.

Will looks up at him from beneath arched brows and a tangled fringe of curls. Daniel knows he has to use his car, but he doesn't have to like it. He waves his hand through the air in dismissal.

"You have no choice, I know. We already talked about it. I already looked through my rolodex for lawyers." Daniel sighs, frustrated with himself as much as with Will.

"Funny. I'll be back before you know it."

"I don't suppose you'll let me help you load it up."

"Between your injury and the risk of leaving evidence…that would be a no."

"It's still light outside. You aren't loading the car now."

"No, just setting it all in one place. I think…"

Will's phone vibrates and beeps in his pocket. Daniel raises his brows as Will checks the caller id.

"It's Hannibal." Will says simply.

Daniel moves to sit on the couch. He had to miss the first conversation. He is not going to miss this one.

Will nods at Daniel. He doesn't mind if Daniel remains in the room. Daniel deserves to know what he is dealing with. With both of them.

"Hello." Will says.

"Hello, Will. Busy?"

"The usual. What's on your mind?"

"I'll be direct. First, I have taken the liberty of procuring a vehicle for you if you are interested."

"Very generous. Why?"

"We are agreed that the doctor should remain above suspicion?"

"As much as possible."

"Then you now have alternate means of transportation if you want it. I'll send you the location."

"Done. And…thank you."

"Second." Hannibal says, enjoying himself immensely. "I require advance notice of the location of your...tableau."

"For what reason? To set up camp?"

"Yes, actually. I will need to scout a location from which to view the festivities."

Will sighs and thinks he will have enough to occupy his fractured mind besides wondering where Hannibal is while he stands around drinking coffee with Jack. He looks at Daniel who is riveted to the edge of the couch, eyes wide and hanging on every word.

"Okay. I'll text the address to you if you need it. I chose the Paolini slaughter house. It's been abandoned since the family went into business with the Vergers. You've been here longer than I, do you know it?"

"I think I know the place. About ten miles or so north of Florence?"

"That would be the one. And where are you placing your tableau?"

"A much more accessible and public place. I would tell you but your imagination is formidable. I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise."

"Can't blame me for asking."

"Not at all. Your curiosity is appreciated."

"Anything else?"

Will thinks he will have to destroy his phone at some point. If Jack ever asks to see it…

“It has come to my attention that there is bitterness among the ranks of the Trojans.”

“I have heard the same. A civil war.”

“Do the Greeks know?’

“Menelaus is operating under the impression that all is well among the Trojans. At least their leader…we never came up with an alias for Mason.” Will says.

“Why Antenor, of course.”

“Of course. Well, Antenor has convinced Menelaus that he has the Trojans in his pocket. At least that’s what Menelaus says.”

“The Trojans may not wait for the Greeks to attack. They seek Patroclus.”

“Patroclus is aware. His eyes are sharp.”

“Yes, they are.” Hannibal pauses, wanting to say more but refrains from indulging himself. “They will learn where you live once the FBI sends a security detail to keep an eye on you.”

“And the Trojans will follow them. I don’t think they will cross that particular line. Do you?” Will says, looking at Daniel.

“No, but that will depend on how desperate they become. It does seem more likely they will go after you alone to avoid the bad press that would follow should they make a casualty of one of the local esteemed citizens. They are criminals, but they do have a sense of honor such as it is.”

“Or a sense of public relations. If there is nothing else?”

“No.”

“Then I suppose we wait for the circus to come to town.”

“I’ll see you around, Will.”

Will slips the phone back into his pocket. Hannibal is enjoying this. Will runs his fingers through his hair and stares at the ceiling while he kneads his temples. He thinks the Excedrin is still sitting on the night stand.

“Well?” Daniel says from the couch, unable to keep quiet any longer. The suspense is killing him. He can’t keep his feet still.

Will stretches his arms over his head and cracks his sore neck. “Um…the good news is that I don’t have to use your car…much.”

“I’m sure you’ll explain that in a minute. And the bad?”

“Hannibal is going to screw with the crime scenes. And I don’t know how…yet.”

Chapter End Notes

Vide Cor Meum is the music referred to here and is from the movie Hannibal. It is the supposed opera Hannibal attends where he meets Pazzi and his lovely wife. The lyrics are taken from Dante's La Vita Nuova, a sonnet from Chapter 3. It is also the piece of music Hannibal listens to in his head S1E13 when he visits Will for the first time in BSHCI.

Updated note: It is also known as Dante's first sonnet in the Vita Nuova and is the verse quoted by Hannibal in S3E1 at the gala. The Vita Nuova combines prose with verse.

To every captive soul and gentle heart
into whose sight this present speech may come,
so that they might write its meaning for me,
greetings, in their lord’s name, who is Love.
Already a third of the hours were almost past
of the time when all the stars were shining,
when Amor suddenly appeared to me
whose memory fills me with terror.
Joyfully Amor seemed to me to hold
my heart in his hand, and held in his arms
my lady wrapped in a cloth sleeping.
Then he woke her, and that burning heart
he fed to her reverently, she fearing,
afterwards he went not to be seen weeping.

Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

> The murder tableaux are revealed. Dante and misdirection are on the menu. Some old friends join Will at the crime scenes.
>
> He imagines himself as Hannibal, sees Lucia nude, alive and squirming on a table, wrists and ankles bound to the metal as he leans over her. She screams only in her head because she is too drugged to speak. But she is not too drugged to listen or appreciate what is being done to her.
>
> I want her awake so she can see me; hear me, before I take her apart. As I press the blade into her throat and slide it across, slicing effortlessly nearly painlessly through esophagus and carotid as I would bleed any pig for slaughter, I tell her –
>
> This is for what you would do to me…
>
> As I slice her open from sternum to pelvis, slitting her long and wide to gut her like the swine she is, I whisper into her ear -
>
> And this is for what you would do to him…

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 61

The murder tableaux are revealed. Dante and misdirection are on the menu. Some old friends join Will at the crime scenes.

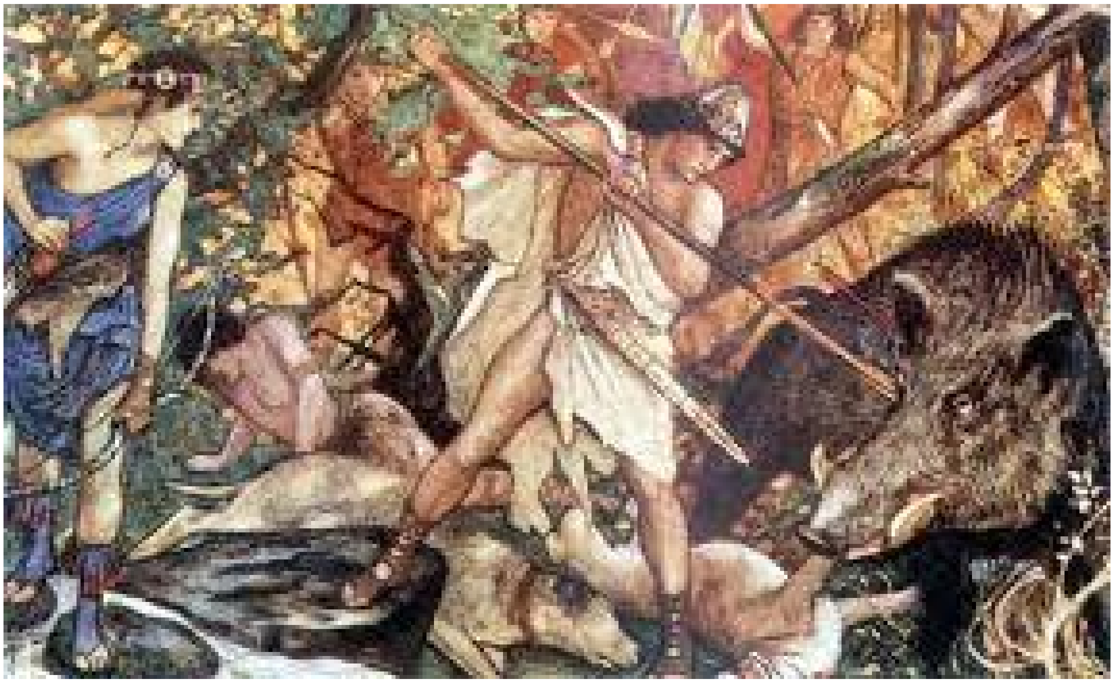

Illustration of the *Calydonian Boar Hunt*, Tanglewood Tales, 1920

Hannibal shifts in his seat and takes a long drink from the bottle of local spring water that glistens wet in his hand. With the other he grips the steering wheel of the work van he drives along, the road a gaping mouth so dark that the beams are swallowed up. He drives away from the abandoned slaughter house of the Paolini towards the lights of Florence.

The graceful light that was Lucia has gone out. Lucia is derived from the Latin word for light. The grace derives from the martyred fourth century saint, and if Hannibal remembers correctly, she had her eyes gouged out thus becoming the patron saint of eye diseases. Hannibal thinks there must be a saint for nearly every condition of humankind. This Lucia was no saint, but her death had not been pointless and the display of her mortal vessel should rival that of any martyr. And her light should guide Will out of his inferno.

So too, should the display of her brother. Luciano also alludes to light, and Will's tableau should prove equally illuminating.

He had seen headlights approaching from the opposite direction, and given the hour, had known who it was. He had left Will to his creation, though memories of sharing that first kill with him had followed him all the way to Florence.

Shadows of Tier would be following Will, too.

He understands Will's design in placing Luciano at the old slaughter house. The connection to Mason will be clear enough. The security around Mason's new slaughter house and plant is much too formidable for Will to manage. Even Hannibal would not take the risk when an abandoned site would do just as well. He has what he needs from the slaughter house and had left Will to proceed on to the city of Florence, for the unveiling of own his tableau.

He cannot sleep. He functions now at the peak of his awareness; the early morning finds him ever the shark circling in shallow water around its prey. Limbs agitate with a delicious restlessness and thoughts swim in a single current, no longer plunged into murky depths to swirl unceasingly in a purposeless sea. He has not felt this focused, this alive in a long time. It is the prospect of death that drives us to greatness and, Hannibal thinks with a smile as he savors another sip, it does not have to be one's own.

His conversation with Roberta swims in his sea as he drives. Always a pleasure to speak with her, her laughter sparkles brightly in Hannibal's ears like the clinking of crystal at one of his dinner parties. And she is ever sharp with her insights. Insightful enough to see past Hannibal's dodging of certain realities he had not wanted to share with her. In hindsight, had she not playfully pricked Hannibal to explain further, he might not have enjoyed a rather invaluable and timely epiphany.

But Hannibal is used to his mind making the odd leaps and jumps that it does. A mark of brilliance that he shares with no one else except his precious Will, or William as Roberta insists on calling him. It was an inquiry about Will that had prompted Hannibal's thoughts along a different path.

Hannibal takes great comfort in the bond he shares with his cousin. And though they have never had the fortune to meet, it is a bond he shares with no one else, but hope springs... Despite being separated by distance, not confined to the physical miles placed between them by his uncle, they share the ancestral traits deep and dark coursing through their veins.

Lone creatures they are; and contact is infrequent between them, but the cry for companionship eventually surfaces. Companionship worthy of the blood they share.

He had listened to the sing song quality of Roberta's voice as she had endeavored to solicit his inner most thoughts regarding the one thing he guards as jealously as his secrets.

"If I am to negotiate with the Paolini on your behalf, Hannibal, I think it…prudent that I understand the nature of the request."

"I would think that obvious. Currency in exchange for a forgotten vendetta against me."

"The vendetta may be for you. But, if the Paolini sought only you, we would not be having this conversation. You desire to keep your treasure safe. And William is your treasure. I have never known you to hold anything quite so dear, *trop cher, peut-être?"*

"*C'est vrai.*" Hannibal had sighed, feeling vaguely childish about his transparent slip. "I had hoped you would interpret my subterfuge for what it was. It is not because I wish to deceive, force of habit to reveal no more than necessary."

"Tsk Tsk, Hannibal." Roberta had chided gently, "Your deflections reveal the depths of the wounds you have suffered at the hands of your former associates. It is in opposition we find true friendship and no one has been more opposed to you than your William, *non*?

"No one. It is out of the opposition that understanding comes, kicking and screaming, but it does come." Hannibal had said, visions of wild curls and petulant puckered lips filling his head.

"Then lay out all the cards face up upon the table for me." Roberta had purred over the phone, "Kings, Jack… and the joker, too."

Hannibal had smiled into the phone. If nothing else, Roberta had paid attention and had sifted through everything Hannibal had ever said to her as they had talked. He had quickly identified the phrases that had plucked the dissonant chords.

The FBI is already using Will to bait me. Mason knows only whatever Jack Crawford chose to tell him. Either way, the Paolini and the FBI think the murder of the twins will lead them to me.

“Mason knows much more than what Jack Crawford told him.” Roberta had said adopting a tone reminiscent of a grammar school teacher, “Mason tried to kill you, you punished him for that. There was nothing actionable for Agent Crawford to act upon. Your William was involved but did not ever disclose to Agent Crawford what happened either. Therefore, Mason knows more than Jack Crawford.”

“What I said is true.” Hannibal had countered, prickling a little at the poke to his integrity, “Mason does not *know* more than what Jack Crawford has told him, but he does have a different perspective than Agent Crawford. Both of them think the murder of the twins will lead them to me, because Will is here, and he will be asked to profile the crime scenes. The FBI will monitor Will and the Paolini will shadow the investigation.”

“And they are aware of your…attachment to him. But you did not think the Paolini meant to use him as live bait, removed from the safety net of the FBI.”

“I had not considered it until now. Will would not willingly walk into a trap of Mason’s design. Mason could not know my mind, or Will’s. Mason does not understand the dynamic between Will and me. What he witnessed and experienced must seem contradictory at best.”

“And yet, Mason is under the impression that you would risk exposure to…attempt a rescue?”

“Apparently…”

At that point in their conversation, the nature of Mason’s vision of revenge and the form it would take had bloomed in his consciousness much like he imagined similar revelations occurred to Will. The more he had thought about it since, the more he had become convinced of it.

He had thanked Roberta for her unwitting gift of clarity. It is impossible to overestimate the impact a like mind can have on one’s thinking. That would be only one of the reasons he misses his conversations with Will so much.

Hannibal had informed Roberta of the intricacies of their history with Mason, to provide her with the necessary framework from which to negotiate with the Paolini. He is satisfied that Roberta’s interaction will be every bit as ruthless as his own. She is the perfect agent to represent his interests, well, his only interest. Roberta now understands the nature of his relationship with Will. He supposes she always has.

But, the negotiations will take time and the Paolini may rather quench their thirst for blood than accept payment to ignore this particular affront. They will wait, watch the investigation from the sidelines, and look for weaknesses to exploit. The Trojans may only want to appear fractious.

Will remains a target unless they agree to Roberta’s proposal; leaving the traitorous Antenor at the mercy of the Greeks. He will find none with Achilles or Patroclus.

Will may not have killed the Paolini, but he did have a part in Mason’s disfigurement. Mason has obviously made it clear to the Paolini that Will is something of a wild card, and that Hannibal regards him with something more than passing curiosity.

What Mason is experiencing is an altered reality, expressions of his own latent desires. Aren't you, Mason?

Latent desires…oh! Summer camp, yes… I don't have any candy…

The rumor of the Paolini breaking ties with Mason may simply be misdirection. Misdirection that smells of Uncle Jack. Innuendo leaked among the players, insinuations that would serve to deflect accusations later, to further cloud the circumstances surrounding the unfortunate demise of the broken Trojan pony Jack has tasked to bring him in.

Hannibal traces his finger around the lip of the bottle as he considers the scenarios that might prompt Jack to sacrifice his pony. The pony would have to wander too far from the stable. Jack would have to leave the gate open for that.

Hannibal can only hope that Paolini greed will win out over pride. Hannibal knows the pitfalls of pride first hand.

So you each twist in an inferno of the other's making. Sins against each other. He, for his treachery.

And I, for my pride.

He understands your universe Hannibal. So few people can see us, and fewer still who can look without turning away. Too much pride in your cunning and orchestrations, too much pride in your creation to see with his eyes. You forgot what motivates him, didn't you?

For a moment…

What is his nature? What would you say drives your William if I were to seek his nature?

His fear.

Then his inferno is shaped by that fear. Fear of becoming and his act of betrayal…

Yes, Roberta, he was trying to stop it, in the only way he knew how.

Careful then that you do not become too prideful this time. Before you destroy the very thing you love.

Only the gods can commit hubris against each other. Only forgiveness from the other will free Hannibal from his pit of regret. Acceptance will free Will from the tortuous confines of his own pit.

He glances in the rearview mirror into the dark space at his back; the windowless van holds the crates and cargo he must deposit under the guise of a city worker, specifically a worker for the Firenze Dipartimento Lavori Pubblici. Hannibal has even borrowed a uniform, though its former owner had been reluctant to give it up, and Hannibal had taken a rather dim view of his attitude. Perception, sharp tool that it is, had indeed pierced the city worker.

The Mercato Nuovo usually opens at nine on Sunday morning, but Hannibal thinks there will be no market today. The Fates sit at the feet of Zeus and they will bend to his Will.

“Oh, Signor…look at this.” The stylist had said running her tapered fingers through the rumpled locks of hair.

“It’s been awhile.” Will had agreed.

“Nice and thick, though.”

She had stood behind him, looking at him in the mirror, scissors and comb in hand. “Shame to cut if off.”

Will had gazed into the mirror and had silently agreed with her. To cut off one his prime assets would be unthinkable. Will learned a long time ago how his appearance affects people. To alter it too much would put him at a disadvantage. Expectations must always be considered when one intends to utilize those expectations.

“Just off my neck.”

As she had snipped and Will had watched tufts of brown fall to the floor he had added, “But not too much.”

The cut had not taken long and Will had sat through the trimming of his beard feeling a little awkward with the attention. Accustomed to always grooming himself, allowing the stylist to do it felt oddly personal, an invasion of his space. Her careful ministrations had reminded him of his time in the hospital. He had blushed with the nurses there, too.

As Will sits in the stylist’s chair, he thinks how the plastic apron draped over him, is not unlike the clear plastic he had worn a few hours ago and had burned up in the Volvo he had set aflame in a field before walking a couple miles in the pre-dawn light to call for a taxi. The trunk had been full of presents from Hannibal, a killer’s Christmas in July, including a gallon of gasoline for torching the evidence.

Hannibal’s efficiency had struck Will as starkly brutal, but Will had found himself feeling grateful nonetheless. And had found himself feeling angry for feeling grateful. A barrage of emotions had cascaded through him all night. He feels them still as the stylist adjusts the seat back and arranges a very warm and aromatic towel on his face.

“Trust me.” She says, “you will thank me for this.”

His thoughts drift as the warmth of the steamed towel sinks into his face, opening pores filled with the sweat and dirt of where he has just been. Daniel had suggested the trip to the hair salon before meeting up with Jack. As Will had looked into the mirror back at Daniel’s’ house after taking a shower, he had expressed his concern over how ragged he appeared. He’d had very little sleep the last couple days and he looked like it.

Since sleep was a remedy beyond his reach, Daniel had told the taxi driver to let them off at his regular salon on the way to the crime scene. Since it would not do to show up looking as he had upon his release from BSHCI, Will has to admit that Daniel’s idea of a facial and a haircut was a good one. As Will’s eyes succumb to the heat and drowsiness, he begins to don the other pieces of armor he needs to wear for Jack. Appearing rested and sane is only part of the costume he must create.

Daniel had reluctantly dropped him off at the edge of the back road where the Volvo had been parked. Will had bit his lip upon seeing it. The model, even the color had been the same as his old car, impounded in the lot of the FBI. Either touching sentimentality or blatant mockery, Will could not decide which.

Will had told Daniel to fight the urge to clean his own car after returning home since washing and vacuuming his Mercedes before dawn might seem a little odd to his neighbors. There would be plenty of time to take care of it later. All he had to do was park in the garage, lock it up, and try and get some sleep.

When he had returned to Fiesole and dragged himself inside Daniel's' house, he had found Daniel asleep and had envied him for it. It had been around six or so that Alia had called with news that it appeared Lucia had been found, and the scene was so grisly that they had to shut down the entire market to wait for Interpol and the FBI to arrive from Rome. Even she had not been permitted to enter the crime scene yet. Will had refused Alia's invitation to join her saying he would wait for Jack and the FBI instead. She couldn't very well announce to her captain she had called him.

Alia had been forced to agree that Will's appearance without the FBI would raise questions better left unasked about her relationship with him. It had not taken long for Jack to call.

Morning, Will. Are you up?

I am now. It's a little early for a social call.

It isn't. I'm on my way to Florence as we speak. Hannibal has displayed one of the twins. I'm looking at a picture sent by Firenze PD and it looks like Lucia.

Where?

At the Piazza del Mercato Nuovo. She's a fucking fountain, Will.

Il Porcellino?

Yeah, a pig fountain. It's total mayhem. I'll call again when I get there, clear the way for you to come. Do you have the letter from your psychiatrist?

Yes.

Good. Bring him along.

Why?

He understands the pathologies involved. I want his psychological input.

On Hannibal?

And you. Don't show up without him. Gotta go…

Daniel had had mixed feelings about coming along. Hanging around his house all day waiting for news wasn't ideal, but exposing himself to Jack's inquisition was not going to be much fun, either. Being surrounded by a throng of emotional people for the next several hours would pose its own set of challenges. Daniel had brought along his iPod to help buffer the onslaught waiting for him.

Will had his own demons to contend with. He had not mentioned to Daniel his reprieve from the unbidden hallucinations stalking him had been fleeting. His inferno had followed him into of the depths of Daniel's basement. His attentions had been only momentarily monopolized by memories of preparing Tier with Hannibal as he had similarly rinsed, exsanguinated, and sectioned Luciano. All their destinies flying and swimming in blood and emptiness. Pools of it.

Don't go inside, Will. You'll want to retreat. You'll want it as the glint of the rail tempts us when we hear the approaching train. Stay with me.

But absent Hannibal's company, Will had retreated. Upon returning to his workstation after the interlude with Daniel in the kitchen, Will had become acutely aware of the swarm of darkness collecting at the bottom of the stairs as the winged creature of his inferno had descended from the smoky clouds obscuring the rafters above his head. The scraping across his stomach and the rustling of feathers at his side had sparked another inner dialogue. The weight of heavy wings had tugged along his back each time he had lugged up the stairs, impossible to ignore and feeling as real as the caresses settling soft as silk along his neck as he had talked to Hannibal on the phone.

Will had conjured up an incarnation of Hannibal…to fill that void of loneliness that Daniel does not fill, cannot fill.

Where else would I go?

You have everywhere to go.

Even now, the creature keeps him company. If Will would open his eyes, he would see the creature seated beside Daniel, preening slick feathers as its serpentine tail coiled about the feet of the chair. He supposes he prefers the company of Hannibal's feathery counterpart rather than the reassembled corpse of Luciano talking to him from the backseat of the Mercedes as Daniel had driven them to the location of Hannibal's largesse.

Will, are you okay?

Daniel, we both know I'm not okay.

I just…are you sure you know what you're doing? Accepting the car from Hannibal?

He wouldn't have offered the car with any intention other than what he said.

> *I know what you are now; I can see you with his eyes.*

How can you be sure?

> *Did you feel what coils inside you as you crushed my face?*

It's hard to explain but to offer me the car under false pretenses would be rude.

But messing with your crime scene isn't?

> *I know the monster inside you squirmed. And you liked it.*

No. That's part of the design. You and your car are not part of the design. This is between me and him. The offer of the car is genuine.

He wouldn't offer you a broken ladder.

Exactly.

I see your becoming. Can you see it?

When did you know the Paolini were related to Matteo and Carlo?

I knew not to trust Mason from the beginning. But I did not know the family ties or that their crime family was so extensive, nor did I know that Lucia and Luciano were twins until I talked to Alia. Mason's contacts here in Italy are well below my radar.

You knew… You didn't want to look too closely.

They were content to use you until the twins went missing.

They had no reason to interrupt the hunt. Mason must have turned up the volume on my involvement or importance after the disappearance. Had he told the Paolini sooner, the twins would certainly have dragged me off a while ago. Mason must have withheld my involvement until just recently.

You think Mason is taking a hit from the Paolini for not telling them sooner? The family must hold him partially to blame.

I don't doubt it. Mason has quickly pointed the finger at me.

Maybe you will you share a nice meal over a bottle of chianti… What does mockery taste like?

Luciano had kept him company as he had driven the Volvo to the slaughter house. Once Will had set about arranging his tableau, Luciano had receded like vapor into the monstrous montage of flesh and Will had once again been alone with his thoughts though not completely alone. Hannibal's feathery incarnation had kept him cradled in its embrace, an embrace Will finds increasingly difficult to resist.

Will feels the towel, now quite cool, slip from his face. He blinks open his eyes to the bright lights of the salon and looks up the face of the stylist. She smiles at him, all large brown eyes and pink lipstick and she readjusts the chair, spins it so Will can have a look in the mirror.

Will can't help but grin at his reflection. He looks good, healthy. The dark circles under his eyes are diminished and his skin is refreshed and almost glowing. The trimmed up curls and whiskers makes a big difference. He thinks it amazing what half an hour in this chair has done for his appearance.

"Not bad, eh?"

"Not bad at all. Thanks."

"You come back anytime." She turns to Daniel. "And you! You're next?"

"Oh no. Not today. But, I'll be back soon."

"*Bene*. And you bring him with you, make my day."

Daniel grins and stands up while Will takes care of business at the register. Will looks a hundred percent better. Showing up at a crime scene looking like he just got out of rehab would have been a huge mistake. Daniel decides Will cleans up really well. The suit he chose seems made for him. The light unlined blazer hugs his shoulders and the trousers gather snugly in all the right places. And the dark indigo of the suit paired with the faded cornflower of the shirt accentuates those pale blue eyes perfectly.

He looks outside through the huge panes of glass before he stares too long, and waves at the taxi driver.

Daniel instructs the driver and they are soon headed toward the Piazza del Mercato Nuovo, the city's famous farmer's market although Daniel knows that nowadays it is more a maze of souvenir shops for tourists. It's not far from the Palazzo Vecchio and the Fountain of Neptune which Daniel thinks is fortunate since traffic becomes a parking lot by the time they reach the cobbled square containing replicas of the statues once commissioned by the Medici.

They get out of the taxi and take a moment to orient themselves among the throngs of tourists and street artists crammed into the piazza. Will cranes his head to look around and marvels at the wonders of the Renaissance on display and thinks he is an idiot for not making the time to take a tour of the Uffizi since he has been here.

Daniel points across the piazza and Will falls in step beside him. Daniel watches Will as they walk briskly as they can and he realizes Will is adjusting his mindset as they walk. There are subtle changes in his face, and especially his eyes. Still disarmingly blue in the sunlight, but guarded and quite closed off. Daniel figures he must be preparing himself for Jack. And the battalion of FBI and local PD who have been informed he's on the way.

Daniel senses the intense self-consciousness that Will feels with every step. Knowing that many of the people he is about to meet have heard varying accounts of what transpired at Lecter's house that night in Baltimore, and have heard plenty of other things about him clearly bothers him. Daniel thinks all of that must pale in comparison to the voices in his head. Daniel knows Will's dreams are always hovering, punching holes into his awareness without notice. He thinks it a good idea that he is here with Will. He will know if Will is becoming overwhelmed. He has not profiled a scene in a while, not with Jack Crawford. And not one of Hannibal's.

Since Will already knows the victim and the murderer, Daniel tries to imagine what Will's imagination will show him when he absorbs the evidence and recreates the crime in his mind. Hannibal knows how Will's mind works. He has an idea of what Will might see in his tableau. His nerves vibrate inside, strings pulled too tightly across fractured frets, discordant and dread filled.

Rather than acknowledge Will's inner distress by making a deal out of it, he decides to engage Will in conversation hoping that the mental exercise will help ground him, ease the stress he knows Will is feeling as they approach the piazza and the crime scene. He has some questions of his own he hopes Will is in the mood to entertain.

"You'll be profiling his work again. You'll be profiling your own work, too."

"I've done it before."

"He's counting on you to provide misdirection."

"I've done that before, too."

“Jack is aware, isn’t he?”

“Jack is very aware and he will be playing all sides of this. He has to. It’s his job.”

“It used to be your job, too.”

“And I’m counting on Jack to remember that.”

il porcellino

Il Porcellino, Piazza del Mercato Nuovo

“Over here!”

Will hears Jack’s voice, loud and abrasive over the din of the crowd gathered around the Mercato Nuovo. He and Daniel had had to get out of the taxi blocks away and walk only to be stopped and frisked by local PD while waiting for clearance from Jack.

“Let them through” Jack’s voice crackles over the walkie talkie as he waves from atop the steps from the other side of the colonnade to the officers standing at the barrier of familiar yellow tape.

Will ducks and holds up the tape for Daniel to follow. Daniel’s face is pinched with anxiety, his green eyes glitter as they dart here and there, absorbing everything as the scene unfolds around him. Will weaves his way around the marble pillars that line the Piazza, feeling the scalding heat of eyes upon him as he walks to the other side, to find Jack standing before a circle of stained curtains, drawn around the fountain statue and the dramatically staged corpse he knows is there. Will thinks of an operating theatre and decides this is exactly what Hannibal intended. Jack stands feet typically apart, arms folded over his chest as he watches Will’s approach.

His tired brown eyes flicker over Will, taking in the suit he borrowed from Daniel and the freshly cut hair and finely trimmed beard. Will does not miss the approval in his eyes. He remembers standing in Hannibal’s waiting room to resume his therapy, freshly groomed and splashed with new cologne chosen with deliberation and purpose. He remembers the satisfaction at turning to Hannibal as the door to his office had opened and Hannibal’s look of surprised delight, followed quickly by an appraising gaze that had trailed him clear across the room. Two predators circling one another amidst the civility of teak, leather, and Isfahan carpets.

He doubts Jack will nuzzle his neck as Hannibal had done, though. They had taken up their usual adversarial positions on the chrome and leather chairs but as the session had progressed and Hannibal had opened his liquor cabinet to pour two tumblers three fingers full of thick velvety whiskey, he had not returned to his chair, preferring instead to devour Will with his eyes up close and inhale him from behind, fingers rifling gently through the edges of blunted curls at his neck. Fingers Will feels upon his skin beneath his collar as the scar tugs along his stomach.

He allows Jack to assess him, gives him time to adjust his expectations as Will does the same.

His gaze shifts to Daniel, probably noting the abrasions first and foremost, but his eyes linger upon the same haircut, same stubble, similarly cut and color suit, though with a crisp white shirt instead of Will's cornflower. Jack's gaze pauses at the sight of the lime green iPod clipped to the blazer's pocket. Jack frowns and shifts his gaze back to Will. A thin smile graces the heavy grey whiskered jowls.

"Glad you could make it. Ever look at a clock?"

"I've had some issues with … clocks." Will says, not smiling. "Not a pleasant morning I take it."

"No." Jack pauses and holds out a hand. "But good to see you."

Will takes it, feels the warmth in the grip and smiles into Jack's face as he pumps his hand with equal steadiness. "You too, Jack."

The scar Jack bears from Hannibal raises pale and thick from his neck. His collar is open and loose, and Will decides he wears his wound like a banner, the battle scarred Menelaus reminding the troops he has faced the enemy and survived.

Jack turns to Daniel. "Doctor Clayton. Nice to finally meet you face to face."

As Daniel takes his hand, Jack glances at Will and back to Daniel but still makes no comment though Will knows a remark lurks behind the tightly pressed lips. Jack's scrutiny does not cause Will to wilt inside, but he adjusts his posture to give the impression that it does. Jack is more comfortable when he feels empowered. Will needs Jack to feel comfortable with him.

Will looks at the curtains drawn across the crime scene with dismay. He notes the sign from the city's Public Works Department and the pool of pale red water beneath the white curtains smeared with stains from bloodied gloves.

"Did you put up the curtain, or was it already here?"

"Already here. Kept people away for a little while. Best we can figure is that he pulled up here sometime during the night, set it up and left. Probably used an actual city utility van. Some witnesses already said they'd seen one parked here in the wee hours. And, one of their night crew has not reported in yet."

Will knows they will never find the city worker. He looks around at all the people milling about and the crowd pressing close to the barriers. He sees a few photographers and notes several news vans parked further up the street. A sleek black FBI van is parked at the curb and Will wonders if Zee and Price are inside. He looks again at the photographers and their cameras, lenses aimed directly at them.

"I'm going to end up in some pictures, Jack. Am I correct in assuming you want him to know I'm here?"

"Here as in at the crime scene here? Because he has to know you are in Florence. The twins must have told him all about you once he grabbed them."

"They must have had all the information they collected on him on them,too. He made the connections to Mason and me pretty quickly I'd imagine."

“Well, it can’t be helped if your face gets in the paper. But, no interviews, not yet anyway. Who knows, might turn out to be beneficial to the investigation.”

Will raises his brows at the remark but says nothing, just tucks it away for later.

Daniel’s attentions shift between the bloody curtains and the conversation between Jack and Will. Will has reverted into what Daniel can only figure is his usual or former working dynamic with Jack. He stands at his side, his stance deferential. He also stands a little behind Jack so that Jack has to turn his head to look at him, providing Will a brief warning should he need to alter his expression. His thoughts are interrupted by the approach of the local PD. He sees Alia among them, then Ruggerio, and who can only be their captain walking beside him.

“Local PD.” Jack murmurs.

“Where’s Interpol?”

“Getting coffee.”

“All of them?”

“There’s only two. I think they went off to confer.” Jack lifts his hand to take the outstretched hand in front of him. “Detectives… Captain Pazzi. This is Will Graham.”

“Mr. Graham. Your reputation precedes you as they say.”

Pazzi smiles broadly so that the creases lining his bearded face crack along his weathered cheeks. In the bright sunlight even his tanned skin cannot conceal the dark circles under his eyes. The crow’s feet at his eyes and the wrinkles between his brows speak to the burdens of his position. The lines of worry and responsibility etched into his face are lines Will can relate to.

“And who’s this?” Pazzi looks to Clayton who steps away from the curtain and raises his head and actually avoids looking like a deer in headlights.

“Doctor Clayton!” Ruggerio says brushing past his captain to take Daniel’s hand. “He’s one of ours, *Capitano*.”

Alia looks professional in her grey slacks and pink blouse. Her hair is pinned up in a bun and her clear unadulterated skin shines with perspiration. She stands quietly beside him though she and Will exchange looks. Daniel does not miss the spark in the large brown eyes or the curve of her lips as she gazes at him. Will manages to offer a wistful smile and a slight nod before turning back to Ruggerio. Daniel pumps the warm hand firmly and accepts the embrace.

“He plays *calcio* with Alonso. You remember my brother, eh?”

Pazzi nods and waits for Ruggerio to let Daniel go before extending his hand as well. “You play with the local boys, eh? Is that how you got these?” He points to Daniel’s face.

“Oh no. Not this time. Playing with the dogs. Though I have received much worse during a match.”

Daniel laughs as he lets go of Pazzi’s hand. Pazzi is feeling him out with more than his hand. He searches Daniel’s face with the seasoned scrutiny cops seem to possess, and Daniel can feel reservation behind the practiced smile.

“He’s Graham’s psychiatrist. I told you about that other crime scene.” Ruggerio offers, nudging Daniel as if he needed a reminder not mention the crisp Euros he had pressed into Ruggerio’s hands the night he had rescued Will from a trip to the precinct. Daniel thinks that night seems a century ago as he looks at Will, brooding and silent at the top of the steps.

“Other crime scene?” Jack says as Will closes his eyes to keep them from rolling them in frustration.

Jack turns to look at Will and Will returns his gaze, his expression blank. Alia shifts uncomfortably beside Ruggerio. Pazzi looks from Will to Alia and back to Will.

“Unrelated case.” Ruggerio says quickly.

“Maybe we’ll get back to that later. Doctor Clayton is familiar with what we are dealing with here. I asked him to come.” Jack says.

“What we’re dealing with…is still to be determined, isn’t it, Agent Crawford?” Without taking his eyes off Will, Pazzi points his index finger at Daniel, “You still his doctor, Clayton? What for?”

“Still working through some trauma issues. Very much like the therapy cops receive after an especially violent encounter.” Daniel says. “Will had an extremely violent encounter.”

“Yes.” Pazzi says eyes still riveted to Will’s. “I understand he got very close.”

Pazzi drops his hand and moves towards Will, until he stands in front of him, the difference in height between them obvious. He draws his lithe frame erect, angles his head slightly downward. Will has to gaze up at him so he can maintain eye contact.

“How did you survive it?”

“I let him kill me.” Will says evenly, pale blue eyes drilling into Pazzi with a quiet ferocity.

Daniel feels the shifting of emotions in Pazzi. Looks can be deceiving and Daniel imagines that Pazzi has figured there is much more to Will than the pretty face and tailored suit that hovers behind Crawford. Daniel thinks too that Pazzi did not miss the implications in Will’s answer. Judging by the twist of Crawford’s head, neither did he.

“Doctor Clayton is here as a consultant.” Jack slices through the tension by moving slightly in front of Will, “Since he is familiar with the case from talking to Will, I can use his psychiatric expertise, especially since we’re dealing with a psychopathic psychiatrist. I’ve got a badge for him.”

Daniel can feel Will simmering from where he stands. But characteristically, Will’s face remains slack, a mask of impassivity save for the flickering of blue. The emotional currents between the three men rush around Daniel and he feels like he is caught in a riptide.

Daniel knows that when you are caught in a riptide you can’t escape it straight on. He moves to the side, taking up beside Ruggerio who is lighting a cigarette. The aroma of the tobacco fills the air and Daniel nods towards the rumpled pack of Marlboro’s.

“I thought you gave them up.” Ruggerio says holding out the package.

Daniel takes one and inclines his head as Ruggerio lights it for him. He takes a much needed drag on it before he responds, “I thought I was going to spend the day cutting the grass and watching tv.”

"Tell me about it. Haven't had a day off in over a week. And now this… Ima never gonna get home now."

"Go ahead. Give him a temporary badge." Pazzi says, "Him, too." He nods at Will. "So, Agent Crawford brought you here to uh…do your thing?"

"Yeah," Will breathes softly, "Do my thing."

Will refrains from grinding his jaw. As if keeping Daniel around as a consultant weren't bad enough. Jack has now put Daniel in the awkward position of balancing his professional responsibility to his patient with the potentially compromising designation of co-profiler. Actually, Will thinks it a brilliant play on Jack's part. Too bad Jack isn't fucking Daniel.

"Well, to do his thing, he needs some space. Can he go inside alone?" Jack asks politely, clearly not expecting the response Pazzi offers.

"Of course, but I want the curtain at his back open."

"He's not going to touch anything…" Jack frowns at Pazzi like he is a child.

"I want to watch him…" Pazzi says, "…do his thing."

Will tugs at Jack's sleeve and pulls him close, turns his face aside to speak into Jack's ear. "I'm not performing a freak show for the natives, Jack. Get rid of them, or I am gone."

As Jack looks into Will's face, something of the simpatico they once shared softens the deep creases that saddle his mouth. He sighs and nods once at Will. Will lets go of his sleeve. Jack turns to Pazzi.

"He does it the way he wants. It that's not okay with you, we'll wait for Interpol to get back from their coffee run and discuss it." Jack folds his burly arms over his chest and waits.

Pazzi smacks his lips and smiles. "Ah…no reason to halt the wheels of justice. Has he seen it, yet?"

Will knows Pazzi intended to let him work all along. He wanted to know the power structure between him and Jack. Pazzi is smart, but he is way out of his league. He is but a little fish swimming among the sharks. Will thinks he will be lucky to swim away alive.

"He just got here." Jack is saying, "I'd like to finish prepping him first. Standard procedure. He gets all the available information before he takes a look."

"You think it's the Chesapeake Ripper did this?" Pazzi looks to Will.

"I think the man who was known as the Ripper did this. We are not dealing with the Ripper anymore." Will says as he walks down the steps to follow Jack toward the FBI van. "This is somebody…new."

Will ducks as steps into the back of the FBI van where Zeller and Price are hunched over vials and evidence bags. Daniel waits outside, earbuds tucked in tight as he gazes at the crowd and clusters of forensic personnel examining the sidewalk.

“Hey, Will.”

Both Zeller and Price speak at the same time and then look at each other. Will finds himself pleased to see them again. Not overjoyed, but pleased. Will knows he walks among them with a dark cloud hanging directly over him. Talons, maybe antlers scrape along his skin as he remembers cold metal tables and rows of numbered refrigerated cadaver chambers lining the walls of the FBI crime lab they had once gathered around. He will never be welcomed there again. Not that he ever was.

“Hey. Not exactly a vacation, is it.” Will says and smiles. To be sociable.

Zeller rolls his eyes. “I don’t even know what time it is.” He says. “If I ordered something to eat, I wouldn’t know to order pancakes or pizza.”

“You’re in Italy. Always go with the pizza.” Will says.

“Did they draw the curtain for you, yet?” Price says.

“Not yet. What have we got?”

“Well, it’s still pending an official ID, but I don’t think there’s any doubt, it’s the sister. Time of death is inconclusive. Uh, not all of her can be accounted for.”

“She’s missing organs?”

“She’s missing a lot of pieces. You’ll have to see it. I can’t…really explain…” Price’s words trail off as Jack steps inside.

“Give him what you’ve got in a nutshell. I want him to take a look before it gets really hot out there.”

“We’re thinking she’s been dead a couple days at least. Blood drained out, flesh chilled, nearly frozen. At least it was.”

“Easier to slice through.” Will says.

“Oh yeah, much cleaner.” Price says, “And, the storage makes it impossible to know the time of death. The uh, disassembly and animal parts, not to mention the missing pieces. She’s not all there if you know what I mean.”

“Animal parts? With what?” Will looks to Jack but Jack’s lips remain pursed tight.

“Obscures the cause of death.” Price continues, “I mean, this truly horrific display was a methodical deconstruction of means, motive, and opportunity. There’s almost too much here to analyze.”

“The obscurity may look to a new signature.” Jack says. “He can kill with impunity, the actual cause of death shrouded in mystery.”

“Like smoke.” Will says. “But you don’t need the smoke to find the fire when it is already burning.”

“Well,” says Jack, “time to view the BBQ. Looks like Hannibal is serving pork today.”

“No sign of Luciano I take it.” Will says.

“Hopefully, there are some clues in the evidence.”

“You did consider separate tableaux.”

“I find it odd that you didn’t.”

“I never said I didn’t consider it. I said it was an interesting theory. And there could be any number of reasons for doing so.”

“I agree.” Jack says. “Guess we’ll have to wait for the other shoe to drop.”

Will is acutely aware of the change in atmosphere inside the van. Zee and Price have dropped their heads, very immersed in what Will decides is nothing much. Jack has apparently been thinking aloud.

“Talk to Mason yet?” Will says as he steps out the van, Jack behind him.

“A little while ago. He had a photo.”

“Where did he get it so quickly?”

“Internet. Tattle Crime International.”

Will’s jaw tightens with undisguised disgust. Jack’s lips twist into a sardonic smile that captures Will’s mood perfectly. “Lounds.”

“She’s around here someplace.”

“Probably dyed her hair.” Will says.

“If she weren’t so vain, I’d agree with you.”

“This just keeps getting better and better.” Will says.

Will stands in front of Il Porcellino, the famous boar fountain statue that tourists seek out to photograph and to rub its nose. The Renaissance original by PietroTocca sits in the Bardini Museum so that the identical replica that replaced it is the one subjected to the touch of tourists’ fingers along its shiny bronze snout to ensure, as superstition would have it, a safe return to Florence.

Both sculptures are fountains. Il Porcellino’s fountain is connected by tubing to the grisly sculpture fashioned of raw pink exposed flesh, meticulously skinned and superbly attached to what Will figures is an actual pig skeleton, looking very much like his monument to Tier.

Except that it isn’t a monument. Lucia’s body parts have been interspersed with those of a pig, its carcass gleams white in the diffused light of the enclosure. A hose connects the fountains together so that Il Porcellino supplies the water for the fountain inside of Lucia who sits directly in front but at the bottom of the steps so that gravity assists the inner workings of the fountain apparatus

Hannibal has placed inside her. Since Il Porcillino's mouth drips rivulets of water slowly into the pool beneath it, Hannibal thoughtfully installed a pump.

It is an arresting visual. Although Lucia has been posed in the nude, there is nothing erotic about the sculpture of flesh and bone. Her body is skinless, revealing sinew and muscle, even to showing the marbling of the meat. Only her face is recognizable, but the upturned eyes are not hers. Hannibal has stuffed two brown porcine eyes into the sockets. The long tresses of black hair are matted against her head, and her mouth is opened in a grotesque parody of Il Porcellino behind her, clear plastic tubing poking through colorless lips as water dribbles pink into the overflowing trough in front of her.

It is the ghastly face of Lucia he focuses on as he closes his eyes and allows the crime scene to unfold for him as his imagination takes him backward through the entire process, back to what he imagines is Hannibal's current workroom situated beneath whatever fine residence conceals it from above.

He imagines himself as Hannibal, sees Lucia nude, alive and squirming on a table, wrists and ankles bound to the metal as he leans over her. She screams only in her head because she is too drugged to speak. But she is not too drugged to listen or appreciate what is being done to her.

I want her awake so she can see me; hear me, before I take her apart. As I press the blade into her throat and slide it across, slicing effortlessly nearly painlessly through esophagus and carotid as I would bleed any pig for slaughter, I tell her –

This is for what you would do to me…

As I slice her open from sternum to pelvis, slitting her long and wide to gut her like the swine she is, I whisper into her ear -

And this is for what you would do to him…

She bleeds profusely and I separate her rib cage with bolt cutters while she still breathes. I remove her organs one by one, and her eyes grow large at the horror. She feels the tugging of my hands inside her as I pull out intestines first. I watch her eyes close as she clings to life even as her body begins to shut down. I watch as light and air and color evaporate, draining from her face, as ink drawn into stylus, and still she breathes and thinks and feels, in fact she breathes until I remove the lungs.

I pluck out your eyes, not because they offend, but because they will carry a light you will never see. The same light that sent him into his inferno will also serve to deliver him out. In death Lucia, you are reborn. Avatar of Shiva, become the Bringer of Light, Lucifer.

Will opens his eyes, aware that neither his breathing nor his heartbeat has changed. His fingers feel along the scar beneath the soft cotton of his borrowed shirt and the thing inside squirms at the touch, sending shivers of delight as Will presses his hand more firmly against his stomach. He watches the serpent tailed creature rise from the decomposing flesh affixed to blood stained bone. Its red rimmed eyes are thoughtful as it regards him from the other side of the enclosure. Will's back ripples with the sensation of the tines he imagines erupting above his shoulder blades.

As he stares at the creature and Lucia, he thinks how she would have killed him, or helped to kill him. Will knows she would have stood beside her brother and watched. Watched as the Paolini and Mason fed him to their pigs. While Hannibal watched stoically silent, enduring an inner agony until they sent him into the pit to join him. A tiny smile tugs at his lips until he hears the curtain move behind him.

“Will?” Daniel’s voice comes from behind. “You okay in there?”

“Yeah. What are you doing in here?”

“I need to look if I’m going to um…offer my expertise. How did doing…your profile…make you feel?”

“Oddly comforted.”

“Not the answer I was expecting.” A long pause and then, “Fuck…He took her apart…with a cleaver it looks like. Oh god…”

Will turns around to see Daniel swallowing down what he imagines is bitter saliva. Daniel’s eyes water a little and he turns his head away. “That’s an image that’s not going away for a while.”

“I don’t think there is any doubt that this is Hannibal’s work. Sorting through the layers of messages here is going to take some time.”

“Messages not limited to forensics.” Daniel clears his throat and swallows again. “Oh god, the smell…”

Daniel has held up extremely well in Will’s estimation. He is not trained in forensics, his patients are not criminals, at least until recently, and he has been effusive and friendly, a counter to his flat demeanor. He has been absorbing all the attention directed at the two of them, acting as buffer for Will whenever possible and Will is eternally grateful. But Daniel’s day is not over yet. Daniel will need his empathy to handle the inquisition to come.

“I’m done here. Are you ready to play shrink for Jack?”

Pazzi, Ruggerio, and the lovely Detective D’Angelo have departed to take a lunch break. Price and Zeller are either eating or napping in the van, Will thinks the latter. He sits with Jack and Daniel at a nearby outdoor café, the market only half a block away. The café is situated in an unfortunate location. It will be serving only law enforcement today.

Jack is fussing with a salad of tossed greens and a sandwich thick with pastrami. A bottle of beer sits empty beside the fresh one their server just deposited. Daniel sips at an iced cappuccino, eyes distant except when they wander to Jack’s sandwich and they close abruptly.

Will stabs at a chunk of melon and swallows it down with a gulp of ice cold water. He had ordered the fruit salad as an appetizer, but the portion is huge and he thinks he won’t need to order anything else. He looks over at Daniel and thinks Daniel won’t be ordering anything at all.

Once Will confirmed for Jack that he was certain the design was Hannibal’s, the FBI took primary jurisdiction, with the understanding that the charges surrounding the murder of Italian citizens on Italian soil would be left to the Italian authorities. The manhunt would be a shared enterprise between FBI and Interpol, the exact nature of the command structure too convoluted and ridiculously top heavy. It wasn’t going to matter anyway. He reported to Jack, period.

Jack may be familiar with the killer, but he is not familiar with the territory. He will be working with Pazzi and Will can tell Jack is less than enthusiastic about the decision. Will finds Pazzi similar to Jack insofar as rules are concerned. Will has the impression that Pazzi plays with rules hard and fast, like Jack. Which is likely the reason Jack has his reservations.

"The evidence so far is inconclusive." Jack says between mouthfuls of sandwich. "No cause of death. No time of death. Physical evidence pending an accounting of what all is actually behind the curtain. I didn't expect him to leave fingerprints but this…I'm having trouble wrapping my head around this. I mean, why a fountain?"

"Well, we do have motive, Jack."

"Only one?"

"I'll amend that to the plural."

"The primary motive behind the design is buried under all the pieces. The Paolini farm pigs and Mason owns their business so why not just create a pig? Why the fountain?" Jack asks again.

"Il Porcellino is a famous statue. It's a tourist attraction. He has stopped traffic for a square mile."

"He can't leave Florence. Not by air. It's locked down. The public doesn't know who he is, but he wouldn't get past a road block."

"I don't think he's ready to leave yet. This is attention seeking behavior. He's proud of himself. The allusion to the Paolini and to Mason is clear. That tableau was for Mason, too."

"And you."

"And me."

"How? What in that tableau speaks to you directly, Will?"

"C'mon Jack. It's a variation on Tier. He may as well have stuck a photo of me in there."

"I doubt he would part with it if he had one." Jack takes a gulp of beer.

Will puts down his fork. "It means he's on to me. He is confirming what we already know has happened. In fact, Lucia's tableau looks to the past in almost every way."

"Who's past?"

"I think he's showing us the direction to look for meaning. Florence is the epitome of the Renaissance. Il Porcellino was originally cast in the sixteenth century. He is mocking her, but he is using a Renaissance motif to do it."

"And there's her name." Daniel says leaning in to hold a fork over Will's fruit bowl.

Will smiles and tosses his head, watches Daniel poke a chunk of pineapple and shove it in his mouth, smacking his lips and grabbing a napkin to catch the juice. Will figures he probably needs an energizing alternative to coffee. Jack sits back eyes glued to Daniel as he continues to pick through the fruit bowl while Will picks up Daniel's train of thought.

“Right, her name. Means light. She was also named after a saint from the fourth century. The martyr Saint Lucia had her eyes gouged out. So did this Lucia.”

“But he replaced them with pig eyes. She’s no saint.” Jack says, lifting his sandwich.

“No, she wasn’t. A message for the Paolini family.”

“She got what she deserved. Don’t delude yourselves she was anything other than…”

“Meat. No better than the meat you raise for slaughter.”

“Saint Lucia appears in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.” Daniel says.

Will had been counting on Daniel to tie Lucia to Dante. He would rather not announce the connection to Jack himself. If neither of them had mentioned the *Inferno*, Jack might find it strange that two educated people living in Dante’s beloved city had failed to see the connection. Somebody was bound to see. It’s the interpretation in the context of Lucia’s tableau that has to be sold to Jack.

“What part?” Jack asks, wrinkling his forehead.

“In a couple places.” Daniel says poking another piece of pineapple. “In the *Inferno* Dante needs a little nudge to enter, she is the nudge that gives him the courage. Later, in the *Purgatorio*, she helps him to the gates of Purgatory, out of hell.”

“Hannibal didn’t take her eyes just to show she wasn’t a Saint. He is using her name sake for this literary reference.” Will says.

“How? I’m not following” Jack says.

“Eyes are the organ of sight…light. Saint Lucia helps Dante in and out of hell. Lucia and her brother figuratively sent Hannibal to hell, exposed him, found him, forced him to take action where he had been content to remain hidden. He’s going to use them to get out.”

“But Saint Lucia’s intention was not malicious, it was to be helpful.”

“Down in Hannibal’s rabbit hole, we are all outside looking in. Jack, I wouldn’t be surprised if Lucia’s eyes are packed in there somewhere.”

“Because she is a pig, and because of her name, her eyes suit his purpose. That would be consistent with what he’s done before.”

“The devil is in the details.”

“So he’s revealing what she truly is, not punishing her for causing him trouble?”

“I didn’t say that. You know what *contrapasso* means, Jack?”

“For every sinner there must be a fitting punishment. More Dante references. Don’t tell me he’s playing God, handing out judgment…” Jack pauses, “It’s what he’s always done. The Chesapeake Ripper read Dante.”

“Compulsively. Only he’s not God.”

“Or Dante. These are personal affronts, not sins. Hannibal doesn’t see sin.”

“Oh, he sees it, but it is usually academic. Dante’s rules of hell aren’t just that the punishment be fitting, it must be equal to the offense. All things being equal, Hannibal’s hierarchy of sin culminates with treachery, just like Dante as you said, personal affronts. Lucia was condemned for treachery, not for any of her other sins which were plentiful considering her relationship with her brother, and certainly not for contemplating murder. I don’t think murder even qualifies. But treachery and rudeness, well…”

Will takes a gulp of water and levels his gaze at Jack who swallows down the mouthful of sandwich quickly to respond.

“Then why did you escape punishment?”

“I have been asking myself that for a year, Jack.”

“I know why I escaped. There was a door between us and I got lucky. But you…”

“We’ve been down this road a few times…”

“And we keep getting stuck, don’t we?” Jack looks away and grabs his beer.

Will knows the unspoken question that Jack has never asked, but will eventually, when it suits him to hear the answer. He has never asked why Will didn’t use his gun. Why he never got off even one shot when he had fired ten rounds at Hobbs. Will had claimed memory loss from the trauma and had left it to forensics to muddle through. He knows Jack had not believed him, does not believe him still, and Will does not care. Will knows this is why Jack looks at Daniel with such a concentrated expression on his face.

Jack figures Daniel is sitting on information he would very much like to have. Jack sets his beer on the table and resumes eating his salad. Will looks into his fruit bowl. Daniel has eaten all the pineapple.

Daniel considers the emotional flare up he just witnessed. Jack is holding a lot back. At least as much as Will is. His head aches with the tension at the table. He cringes inwardly at the thought of being left alone with Jack. Daniel is not looking forward to that conversation.

“About the *contrapasso*…” Jack says, pushing the salad away.

“What about it?”

“I get the pig connection to the business of the Paolini and to Mason. He bought them out. I get that making Lucia a pig links them, exposes Mason’s hit on him. But what’s the fitting punishment here? What am I missing?”

“Hannibal considers them pigs, livestock.”

“What do you see?”

“I see people, not livestock, Jack. But, these pigs were going to kill him, just like their cousins back in Baltimore. He reduced them to what they are beneath their human faces. They slaughter for a living. He slaughtered her. Poetic irony.”

“You said that the cousins, Carlo and Matteo tried to kill him. Mason sent them to kill him. And Mason ends up disfigured and paralyzed. He said he accidently fell into his own pig pit; his own sister barely got him out. I’m thinking pigs played a bigger part in this.”

“You’d have to ask Mason about that.”

“I’m asking you. Not for the first time.”

“You asked why a fountain.” Daniel says, sensing tempers are about to flare, again. “The location is significant. There are plenty of locations around Florence that have to do with pigs. But this is a copy of a copy of a copy of a particular pig, a boar actually.”

“He’s right.” Will says.

“I’m not up on my Italian history. What allusion are you talking about?” Jack says, clearly interested.

“Not Italian history.” Will says. “Greek. Classical Greece. Mythology.”

Jack rubs at his whiskers at the mention of Greek mythology. Will knows where his mind just went as images of Hannibal’s drawings, one in particular flash through his mind.

“The Calydonian Boar Hunt.” Will says, “Il Porcellino is a representation of the mythical boar of the underworld sent by Artemis to ravage the Calydonian countryside. A bunch of Greeks, the best hunters join together to hunt it down.”

“Are Achilles and Patroclus in the hunting party?” Jack asks, with the lilt of sarcasm edging his words.

Will frowns, “No. This is before their time. The hunting party is led by Meleager, a Calydonian, who eventually kills it and skins it.”

“So Hannibal kills the beast of the underworld and skins her. What is the message?”

“I’m thinking it’s the reason he made a fountain of her. So that we identify which particular pig she is supposed to represent in his opus. He has cast himself in the role of hero.”

“The twins were going to kill you both for Mason. He just did you a favor. So, you owe him, now?”

“I don’t know, Jack. I’m still figuring out context as we go along.”

“You think when we find the brother, there may be more answers?”

“Or more questions.”

“Um…the classical allusions don’t stop there.” Daniel says.

“What else?” Jack says. “What else could he possibly throw in there?”

“The *Iliad*.”

Daniel shrugs at Jack like he should know. Will chews the inside of his lip as Jack glares at Daniel.

“Chapter nine?” Daniels says

Jack glares at him, tiredly, very tiredly. Will thinks he should have told Daniel that Jack doesn’t like quizzes. Daniel offers a half grin to soothe Jack before he explains.

“Well, Achilles is sitting in his tent with Patroclus being angry. He refuses to fight the Trojans. The Greeks send a delegation to try and convince him to change his mind. One of the Greek warriors reminds him of the story of Meleager. He does this because after Meleager killed the boar, there’s a war over who deserved the skin of the boar. Meleager was angry too. He refused to fight, at first, but he eventually did and the Calydonians won.”

“But Meleager dies in the battle.” Says Will.

“Probably why the story didn’t convince Achilles either.” Daniel says. “Maybe Lecter is signaling like Achilles that he won’t be drawn into it or caught by the Paolini. But he is on to them.”

“I know the *Iliad* too. It’s also called the *Wrath of Achilles*. It’s Patroclus or specifically his death that eventually brings Achilles out. Or rather, brought him out. Is he already out or about to come out?” Jack says.

Will bites his tongue, hard.

“Well, I’d venture Hannibal is a bit wrathful, wouldn’t you Jack?”

Jack fidgets in his seat, clearly not pleased at revisiting a topic he finds vaguely uncomfortable, but mostly unfathomable. It is his job to investigate unpleasant things, and Will’s association with Hannibal is especially unpleasant for Jack on many levels. He plunges ahead with his duty.

“Did Will disclose anything about Hannibal’s drawings in his therapy?”

“Uh yeah. I am aware of the significance.” Daniel says.

Daniel glances at Will’s nearly empty fruit bowl and sets his fork down. He sits quietly, blinking his green eyes placidly at Jack. Will leans back in his chair, his mouth a set in a line as he waits for Jack to either stick his foot in his mouth or continue down the path Will is leading him. He knows Jack is turning this particular metaphor over in his mind. He’s probably asking himself how Hannibal intends his wrath to play out. Asking himself if Hannibal is signaling he intends to finish what was started in his kitchen.

Jack pushes his napkin around the table. “Does that mean he’s warning you Will? Or that it’s only you he’ll come for? If he had known you were here before, it would have been easier to get to you without all the law enforcement.”

“If it’s a warning for me, then it’s a warning for you.”

Will meets Jack’s gaze, holds it in the field of blue he knows Jack wants to play in. Jack’s eyes soften a little and he grunts. A very noncommittal grunt, Will decides.

“It would help if we had Luciano, too. He did end up separating them. Not out of convenience either.” Jack says, eyes back to his ragged napkin.

“It would seem there is a method to his madness. Would have been easier to drop them together. Instead we have probably two murders, two messages. Maybe the allusion to the boar hunt means that no one in the hunting party is going to get him. And while they fight over his skin, he sits back and laughs."

"That would seem to include you, Will. You are part of the hunting party, aren't you?"

"That is why you sent me here, isn't it Jack?"

Jack's phone beeps and he holds up a finger while he takes the call.

"When? Just now? ….And it's legit? …You spoke to actual witnesses?"

"Luciano." Will says as the thing inside uncoils beneath his wound. Will feels it slither around beneath his ribcage and crawl into his bowels.

Jack nods at Will. "We're leaving the café now. We'll meet Pazzi and his crew there…No, I don't want to ride with him." Jack clicks off his phone. "Time to hop back in the saddle."

"What did the witness say?"

"A local out with his sons, looking for copper outside of town, not too far out. They check out an abandoned slaughter house, hear talking, follow the voices. It's a radio. The radio is sitting next to a glass box of human remains. The boys freak of course and dad dials 911."

"Are the boys okay?" Will asks thinking miserably about consequences. Unintended or not, there are always consequences.

"Don't know. If they are still there, maybe Doctor Clayton could talk to them. But get this…the slaughter house belongs to the Paolini. It was their center of operations before Mason bought them out."

"Saddle up." Will says sneaking a glance at Daniel.

Daniel manages a weak smile. Brokering the exchanges between Will and Jack has been taxing enough. Seeing Lucia's tableau had been horrific, but she was Hannibal's creation. He now has to look at Will's and pretend it isn't. He watches Jack sign for their lunch and asks the server for a bottle of water to go. Daniel has never ridden a horse, nor sat in a saddle in his life. But he learns quickly.

As Will walks between Jack and Daniel toward the black FBI Mercedes waiting for them, his mind is caught in a barrage of thoughts, like vibrations left in the wake of a strafe of carpet bombing in his head. He knows Hannibal will be at the crime scene somewhere and he's not sure how he feels about that. He does know he feels…alive.

In Nomine Deus, Roberto Ferri

Will looks around at the faces peering into the panes of glass keeping Luciano's remains within the confines of his transparent tomb. There are as many expressions pasted onto their faces as there are people. The slaughter pen has been opened up as much as possible to allow sunlight to scatter the shadows so everyone can see, but Will knows there are plenty of shadows the eyes in this room will not see, no matter how brightly the sun shines.

Daniel stands at his side, eyes down completely absorbed with his shoes. Jack paces around the glass box, perplexed and fascinated at the sight. Pazzi puffs on a cigarette. His third since he stepped into the pen. He also paces, careful not to intrude upon Jack's worn path in the dirt.

Will thinks Alia has not shut her mouth completely since she arrived, and the occasional glances she throws at Will are filled with a stunned kind awe. The tableau is beyond anything in her experience. Though she is a homicide detective, the mind that conceived this awful thing, brought it out of the depths of his imagination to give it form and substance, has left her speechless.

"How am I gonna ever eat spezatto again? *Christo santo…che cazzo, eh?"* Ruggerio tugs at Pazzi's arm, "Ima go outside…need some air."

Ruggerio gives a nod up to everyone and begins to make his way toward the nearest exit. He pauses, “Hey, Clayton…you wanna a smoke outside?”

Daniel lifts his head to shake it at Ruggerio. He appreciates the offer but, “I’m good. I think I should stay here.”

Ruggerio shrugs and walks on out. Daniel forces himself to look at Will’s tableau again. He will be asked to consult on it, try to connect it to Lucia’s. Will had explained his intentions, but seeing those intentions realized in the flesh is altogether different. And while he had seen Will’s vision in pieces, he had not seen the terrible tableau completed in its entire sinister splendor.

Daniel had seen Luciano’s corpse exsanguinated and sectioned into smaller more manageable pieces of limbs, trunk, and head. Will had wrapped them up and left them in coolers filled with ice to chill. He had watched Will, briefly, taking a cleaver to the sectioned pieces. He knew that in doing so, the cause and time of death would be indeterminate, like Lucia’s had been, at least until forensics could piece it together, so to speak.

As he gazes at the tableau now, he understands what Will was going for. He thinks he should be more upset that he understands. He would be more upset except that he is consumed with having realized his worst fear.

There is nothing Will can ask of him that he will refuse. There is nothing Will can do that he will challenge. Will has changed him, and he cannot go back to who he was. In this, he understands Will very well.

The glass tomb Daniel looks at is all of maybe two foot on all sides. All two hundred pounds of Luciano is not in the square construction of safety glass and silicone sealant that sits benignly in the middle of the pen. His organs are still in Daniel’s fridge. The organs were replaced with pork. A lot of pork. The parts of Luciano that did not make it to the fridge are packed in tightly with the pork, so tightly that it is difficult to distinguish which cubes and chunks of meat belong to which animal. There is plenty of bone and flesh pressed against the glass and each piece has been sealed in reams of Saran wrap. Daniel had no idea that human flesh resembled pork so much.

The effect is both hideous and shockingly spectacular. Luciano can now be seen from multiple angles at once, each side of the cube offering a different window from which to view Will’s Cubist masterpiece.

The heat is having its effects, but because Will placed the pieces nearly frozen inside the glass tomb he has fashioned from the two terrariums he took apart, and packed them so tightly, they are being slowly baked in the sun and heat the FBI has so thoughtfully provided. There is no odor of decomposition now, but Daniel feels for the unfortunate technicians in the forensics lab who must unwrap Will’s meat locker. Taking it apart without breaking the glass will provide someone with a delightful afternoon. Will has sealed Luciano’s tomb on all sides completely.

“Well, I think we’ve all had our fill.” Jack says. “The longer it sits here…”

“The more disgusting it becomes.” Finishes Pazzi as he stamps his cigarette into the ground.

“Right, so let’s all step outside. Will? He’s all yours.”

Isn’t he, though? Will thinks but nods at Jack and waits while everyone files out. Alia offers a hesitant smile, and Will’ eyes follow her out but he can’t bring himself to smile back.

“You , too.” Will says to Daniel.

You commemorated me, recognized what I wished to become and gave that to me in death.

Tier’s ghostly apparition appears beside the cube, nude, and Will can see every wound he dealt Randall across the pallid flesh.

I did, Randall.

I would have killed you, but you proved the superior predator.

You were sent to me as fuel Randall. So was Luciano.

Another apparition appears, the shade of Luciano reassembled, also pale, also nude, and marbled with lines marking every cut Will made through his flesh.

I can see you so clearly now.

Can you, Luciano? What do you see?

I see you build a temple, like Babylon to the skies, but you will not escape your inferno there.

I know.

Where is my monument? You killed me, too.

You forced me to kill you…and I enjoyed it. Randall receives the monument.

Why?

He understood who he was. You didn’t. There is no monument to you, Luciano.

I was sent to you as fuel, yet you mock me?

Yes, Luciano. This is who I am. What I feel finally matches the reality of what I see.

Will feels the feathers at his neck as he gazes at the men who would have killed him. Faded light and air and color; Hannibal’s gift of blood and breath to fuel his radiance. He stands still and accepts the warm trailing of lips through his hair to rest against his ear. Talons grip his shoulders and Will relaxes against the sturdy form at his back.

The sin of treachery. Hannibal’s voice whispers.

The sin of pride. Will counters.

Only gods commit hubris against each other. Do you see, Will? I gave you a gift, a rare gift I would offer to none.

I understand your mind, Hannibal. That is my gift to you, but the curse is that I must live with it.

The feathers circle around him more tightly, and Will feels as though he sinking, slipping into an abyss though it feels warm and inviting he knows he shouldn’t give in to his impulses. He wants to turn and embrace the feathered creature with the red rimmed eyes, to return the soft kisses that it delivers along his neck, to return the passion that pulses hot and possessive from his chest.

Do you…love me, Hannibal?

There are no words to describe what I feel for you.

Then, release me.

From me?

From life, Hannibal. You almost did…once.

Did I?

Will catches a whiff of salt air, and the scent grows stronger as Daniel's fragrant mist hovers at the edges of Will's consciousness. He feels the feathers and talons slipping away as his lashes flutter in the flash of sunlight that bursts onto his face. He stares into Daniel's fretful face. Daniel's lips press together as he tries to gage Will's state of mind.

Daniel realizes Will is completely disoriented for the moment and knows Jack shouldn't see this. He wonders what Will saw in his trance, but he cannot worry about that now. Aware that Jack, and Pazzi have walked up behind him he grasps both Will's hands in his.

"A little vertigo is expected, Will. You barely ate today and it's…uh really hot in here. Let's take a walk outside."

"Thanks…" Will mumbles.

"Will? Is he okay?" Jack says from behind.

"I'm good." Will says. "Dizzy for a second."

Daniel hands Will his water bottle. It's half empty but Will doesn't have to drink out of it, just hold it for the prop it is. Will is not about to faint, but he was in between realities and Daniel knows Will had needed a moment to adjust.

Jack and Pazzi watch as Will follows Daniel outside. Will feels their eyes on his back. They will be at him in no time, wanting to debrief and brainstorm about Luciano. His thinks of his dream just now and his eyes wander about the scene outside.

Vehicles are parked everywhere along the perimeter of the crime scene. A jumble of photographers and journalist have found their way here, not surprisingly thinks Will as he looks up at the police chopper overhead. He looks at the half full bottle of water in his hand and chugs it anyway.

"Did I…say anything aloud in there?"

"No, but you were out of it for a couple seconds. You had a visit from the ghosts of Christmas past?"

"Something like that."

Will reminds himself how perceptive Daniel is. Will figures Daniel must keep a mental catalog of his emotions in a ready filing cabinet and over the last few weeks, he has learned to practically read Will's mind as well as feel it. Will is also aware that familiarity has also wound its way around Daniel's psyche and has altered his perception. Daniel is no longer innocent.

Will taps Daniel on the arm and nods at the entrance to the slaughter pit. Jack is walking out, trailed by Pazzi and crew. He waves for Will and Daniel to join them. As he walks, Will prepares himself for the questions and the pissing content between Jack and Pazzi.

"I know we don't have time to talk, but are you okay?" Daniel says softly.

If it were anyone else, Will would be annoyed at the constant inquiries about his mental state, but Daniel knows all about the things running around Will's head and he should be concerned. Will is.

"I'm keeping a lid on it all. And…thanks."

"I'm getting some news from the lab, so I'll share it with everyone." Jack announces as Will and Daniel walk up.

They stand in the entrance, clustered around each other, sweating and smoking in the afternoon sun. Will looks out over the crowd looking for any familiar faces, well, just one really. The lot is blur of tanned and sunburned faces, lots of FBI jackets, and lots of Polizia jackets. Will thinks if they are here much longer, maybe a pizza truck will pull up.

He turns around to peer inside the slaughter pit. Will can see Price and Zeller among others, collecting evidence and taking pictures. He waves and they wave back.

"There is basically no news. Still no word on time of death or cause. The construction is safety glass, the box is sealed tight. No prints. Not on the sealant, the glass, or door. This is not a surprise."

"How about the radio?" Alia says, finally chiming in.

"The radio is new, cheap, and like a million other radios on the shelf. Could have been bought yesterday or last year. Could have ordered off Amazon, who knows. It's a dead end. Batteries were fresh, no prints on those either, and I have to admit it was a pretty clever idea seeing as this place is huge and abandoned."

"This Ripper, Lecter…he never leaves prints, right?"

"Never."

"That's not entirely true, Jack." Will says.

"Oh yeah, yeah." Jack says, remembering, "He left a print on a flower petal. That city councilman he grew into a tree."

"And he left traces of Chilton's drugs of choice, and his, in the body."

"Misdirection. And direction. He purposely left evidence in the water so I would find…Miriam."

Jack grows quiet for a moment. Will has not asked about Jack's former protégé, the recruit he had sent after Hannibal. Will is not about to ask her about her now.

Jack shakes out of his momentary reverie. “He has never left an *unintentional* print, Captain Pazzi.”

Pazzi blinks a couple times. “He grew a guy into a tree? How the fuck do you even think up stuff like that?”

“Well, it made sense once you thought about it.”

Will offers to turned heads and silence. He turns aside, returns his gaze to his masterpiece.

“Will, what are we looking at in there?” Jack snaps.

“Could you be more specific with the questions, Jack?” Will says, “Because I’m thinking a lot of things.”

“I have no doubt of that. How does it connect with the sister, if it connects at all?”

“It connects. Not on the surface, except for the pieces and the pork, which I think is pretty obvious to everyone.”

“But there’s no sculpture, no historical or literary connections.”

“Let’s not be too hasty about that. It’s um…packaged differently, but I’m thinking he’s moved from the past to the present. Like we were thinking, two murders, two messages.”

“Okay. So he takes the one twin and makes a Renaissance fountain out of her with pig parts. And he takes the brother and makes…what? A rubrik’s cube?”

“With pig parts here, too. It’s in the Paolini slaughter house. He’s really giving the Paolini the finger, Jack.”

“Yes, he is.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking…” Pazzi says as smoke curls up his nostrils, “We are assuming the same *he* did both, eh? Have you ever not been able to establish time and cause of death with his other victims?”

Jack raises his brows and looks to Will. “You know, that’s a really good point. We’ve always been able to establish time and cause. Maybe it matters to him this time that we don’t. What do you think?”

“It’s Hannibal, Jack. Anything is *possible*. I think we haven’t given the lab enough time, but there is the possibility he’s buying time.”

“Time for what?” Pazzi says, “To eat them?” Pazzi almost laughs, but notices neither Will nor Jack is smiling. The grin fades and he looks aside at Ruggerio. Ruggerio isn’t smiling either. No one is.

“The Ripper used to kill in sounders of three, like three pigs. Seeing people as pigs is not new.” Will says.

“You said he wasn’t the Ripper anymore.”

“He isn’t. It’s still part of his pathology. But, even the catalyst in a chemical reaction is changed in the process. This is an evolving intelligent psychopath we are dealing with. Not a static serial killer.

This one…has imagination."

Will does not miss Jack's thoughtful expression as he observers Will tallking with Pazzi. "Contamination works both ways." Jack says quietly. "You think Hannibal has a friend, Captain?"

"If anything is possible with this guy, then why not? If he is working alone, why two murder scenes? Absent some evidence or some motive, I go with what is obvious."

"We have him on camera grabbing both of the twins at da Vinci. Where does the friend come in?" Jack says.

"You got close to him, right? That's why you are here, not just to profile, but to…bait him." Pazzi says pointing at Will.

Will looks down at the finger and back up to Pazzi's face. "Hannibal will not be baited again. Not by me. He would expect that. I think we need a new playbook."

"On a first name basis with him, huh?"

"When he guts you, you can call him Hannibal, too."

"I think you qualify as tasty bait. You pissed him off. Lover's quarrel, eh? He was in love with you."

"He loved me for my mind." Will says.

"What's' your point, Pazzi? Jack says.

Jack clearly does not appreciate one of his own getting the third degree from the locals. Will thinks Jack would rather reserve those kinds of accusations for himself.

"Point is this, maybe he's still in love with this one. He sends him love letters. Maybe he hates him. Sends him hate mail. But maybe, he found another lover and wants to make your profiler nuts."

Will's mouth twists in frustration and he clenches his fists for good measure. Will chews at his lip to keep the gratified smile that threatens to bloom. Pazzi has saved him the trouble of introducing all of those ideas into Jack's head. Even better that Jack is not fond of Pazzi to begin with.

If the thought has crossed Jack's mind that Will is the friend, he won't run that past Pazzi. Will is certain Jack would keep that close. Jack has likely thought about it already. He introduced the idea of separate tableaux to check Will's reaction. All Will has to do is remain non-committal. Ambiguity is the word of the day. Ambiguity - not outright denials or lies. Denial and lies invite interrogations and investigations for evidence.

If there are no warrants, there will be no searches. Without warrants, Jack cannot get anything from Will that he does not want to give him. Including Daniel.

Pazzi angles his head to one side and looks Will up and down as he slowly takes out another cigarette. He flicks the silver lighter with style and lights up, blows the smoke at Will and raises his brows. Will ignores the invitation, but continues to allow Pazzi see him simmer.

"So, what do we have here? One killer or two?" Jack says.

“Let’s see what shakes out from the crime lab.” Will says, “And I’ll try and interpret what I see, Jack.”

“That’s…good enough for me.” Jack says.

Will walks back inside. Daniel follows not knowing where else he should be. He watches Will circle Luciano’s tableau. As Will’s eyes sweep over the glass box, Daniel feels the heaviness in his chest become a bit weightier. He has felt the twinges in his gut that come with being in Will’s company, but as Will stands staring at his work, Daniel feels the pride. The heaviness becomes an ache.

“You asked if this was a rubik’s cube, Jack?”

“Not seriously, but what…is it?”

“Lucia’s tableau is the past. Luciano is the present. Classical and Renaissance motifs were used with her. The messages and ideas in Luciano’s tableau are expressed with Cubism.”

“I told you! That’s ten bucks, Zee.”

Price’s voice peels out over the steady hum of voices that consume the pit. Jack looks at both Price and Zeller with his mouth open. Will can’t decide if Jack is embarrassed by them or angry. Probably both. Daniel stands to the side, fingers massaging his jaw as he observes the lab techs. He looks over at Will who shrugs a shoulder. Daniel rolls his eyes but listens intently to their argument about Will’s artistic composition and style.

Will thinks Daniel must think they are all crazy.

“Just because it’s all lines and planes and arcs doesn’t make it Cubism.” Zee sniffs.

“Well, it’s not Expressionism.” Price says dismissively, waving a dusting brush through the air.

“That was a joke, like an hour ago. I said pop-art or kitsch. He wrapped the parts up in SARAN WRAP for Christ’s sake. I mean that screams Andy Wharhol.”

“Now how do you figure that? What’s the inspiration? Because I’m not seeing it.” Price taps the brush in front of his eyes to watch the dust dance in the sunlight.

“Maybe Surrealism. I mean, come on…this entire day has been surreal. This…is like putting dreams, really bad dreams in a box. Surrealism and pop-art. Boom!”

Zee claps his hands together. Jack jumps a little at the sound.

“Okay, knock it off you two.” Jack says. “I didn’t know I had employed art critics.”

“Never know when you’ll need one, do you?” Price smiles. “Pay up, Zee.”

“Just because ol’ Will here says it Cubism…”

“It is.” Will says, actually annoyed that Zee can’t see his design. “Cubism is a participatory art form. And it is kind of like pop-art in that the viewer and the artist have to share a language, a frame of reference. But Cubism requires the viewer to analyze each piece, sort of participate with the artist to rearrange the fractured pieces so they make sense.”

“But the placement of these pieces is random.” Zee argues.

“I don’t think so. Did you really look at it from all the angles?”

“It’s multiple views of Luciano. In pieces.”

“Well, I’m seeing multiple views of complete sides of Luciano, but the pieces are jumbled to form a message.”

“What are you getting at, Will?” Jack says, obviously intrigued.

“You have to know how Hannibal thinks, his language and frame of reference so to speak. Look…”

Will kneels down inviting Jack to do the same while the Italian police watch. He can only show Jack so much. There is a message there for Hannibal, but Jack isn’t supposed to see that message. There are other messages for Jack. And, Pazzi.

“At first it does look random, but each side is a mini-tableau each with faces, hands, feet, and so on. Like a jig-saw puzzle, each side a different view simultaneously pictured in bold beautiful color. The wrapping is reminiscent of meat packaging and I suspect that is for Mason to chew on.”

Jack drops low to the ground, unconcerned with his trousers at the moment. He scans the panes of glass with renewed interest and he practically crawls around the tableau on all fours.

“I see what you mean. Luciano only had two eyes so that’s why there are pigs’ eyes mixed in. When he ran out of human parts, he substituted pig. This…is going to take some time.”

“I don’t see any organs.” Will says.

“Neither do I. The pork is both filler and mockery. Just like the sister. Well, what do you suggest we do with it? We can’t keep it here to look at it, it’s going to putrify.”

“Take it back as is, keep it cold. At least until all six sides can be photographed and analyzed. Once you open it, it will change.” Will says.

“Change seems to be the other motif here today.”

“A lot has changed, Jack.”

“Well, let me arrange for transport. I’m tired. You must be tired. We’re not done yet, but I need a break. You?”

“I’ll take it. Anyone think to bring refreshments?”

“I’ll get Pazzi on it. He’s good for something, huh?”

Jack walks outside with Daniel and Will. Pazzi and crew linger behind which suits Will just fine. He doesn’t want to talk to Pazzi at all, and would like to continue avoiding Alia.

As soon as they hit the sunlight there is an audible shift in the noise level and Will realizes the noise is directed at them. It’s the press. Will turns his head away from the line of photographers.

“I think it’s safe to say he’s going to know we are all here. Hey, Daniel? You should go stand off somewhere else. Try and look unimportant for a few minutes.”

“Go back inside with Zee and Price if you can stand it.” Jack offers.

“Bring me some water in a few?” Daniel gives Jack a mock salute and turns to go back inside.

Will turns to Jack. “With all this press someone will start asking questions about me.”

Will catches movement out of the corner of his eye and the long ginger spirals of hair register too late.

“Speak of the devil and she appears.” Jack says.

“Agent Crawford. Mr. Graham.”

“Ms. Lounds” Jack says, “How did you…”

“Oh, I’m very resourceful. And I speak fluent Italian. Wouldn’t you know, Italian men love redheads.”

Jack immediately begins to wave over someone, anyone to cart Lounds away. Will knows in the meantime, she’ll try to make the most of her fleeting opportunity. Upon her release from protective custody, Lounds had resumed her old ways, had photographed him in the hospital and run it on Tattle Crime. He knows whatever he says, no matter how unrelated, will find its way onto her new blog. Will stares out over the yard, not giving her the satisfaction of a face to face conversation. Not that what is happening is anything close to a conversation.

“Seems like old times.” Lounds says in that annoyingly smug way she has.

“Memories are overrated.” Will says.

“Huh. So, Mr. Graham…Will. Two love letters to you? Or did you write them to each other?”

Will turns his head slowly toward Lounds, takes a moment to look into her bright blue unblinking eyes. “Did you charge your phone this morning?”

Will thinks there has been nothing so satisfying all day as to see Lounds’ eyes nearly pop out of her head as the officer Jack finally managed to rustle up takes Lounds by the arm to escort her back to the pack of vultures that stand behind the crime scene tape. And Jack missed it.

Chapter End Notes

Il Porcellino is also the fountain Pazzi washes the blood from his hands in in the movie Hannibal. Hannibal has just stabbed the young (and stupid) thug Pazzi paid to try and get fingerprints off Hannibal. Pazzi leaves him to die on the sidewalk by one of the pillars in the Mercato Nuovo.

Also, Will's remark at the end to Lounds is a reference (veiled threat) to the encounter at Will's barn in Wolf Trap. Freddie thought Will was going to kill her. Will is implying that she was lucky she had her phone. More dark humor from our Will.

Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

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>
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> Daniel walks over to stand near Will and Jack. He finds himself compulsively trying to account for all of Luciano contained in the shimmering panes of glass. It is repulsive and upsetting and you can’t tear your eyes away from it. The mind wants to reassemble it. Daniel admits it presents a stunning if not completely mad effect.
>
> And Will did this without drugs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 62

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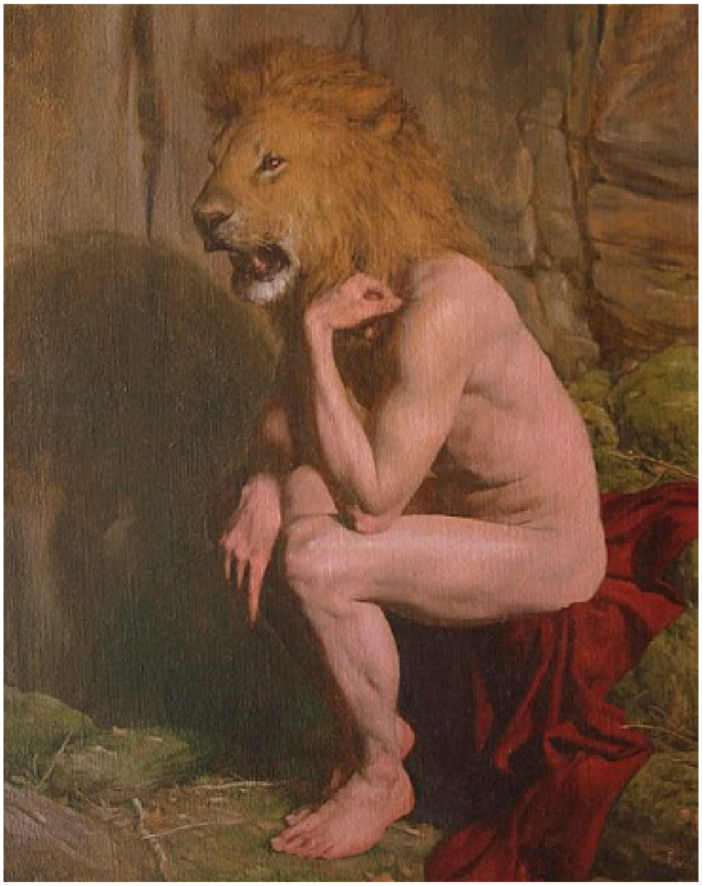
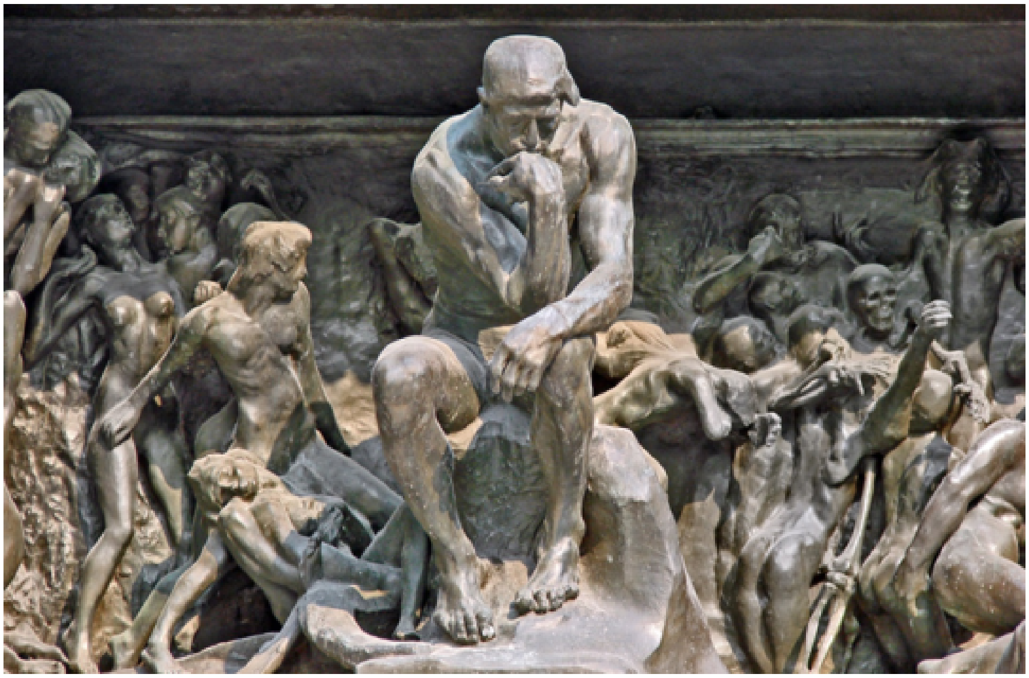


Lion and Man, Paul Reid

Franklyn…

Yes?

You have to convince yourself the lion is not in the room. When it is, I assure you, you will know.



The Thinker, atop *The Gates of Hell*, Auguste Rodin from the Musée Rodin

Will watches the ginger curls bounce off Lounds' shoulders as she huffs alongside the tall young Polizia officer. Will imagines the advance she received for her book is now invested in her chic designer wardrobe. The spirals of glossy copper shudder with every step she takes on towering heels and her boney bottom wiggles furiously in her tight dress as she tries to keep up with the officer's longer strides.

She is greeted by cheers from the less brazen of the journalists assembled at the line. He tells himself Lounds may prove useful at some point, but he can't make himself believe that. Seeing Lounds again sends Will to puzzling over when and how Hannibal found out about her. He shoves aside the mystery of the fly in his ointment and supposes he will be checking out her blog. He can count on her to pursue her version of the truth however pathologically.

Pathologically speaking, Will is tempted to find out in which hotel she has made her lair. Lounds has a way of becoming a problem. He rubs at his neck, the tension knotting up to compete with the knot in his stomach as the thing inside him slithers. Will imagines its slickened scaly tail winding around his innards.

Jack has stopped on his way back to talk to some FBI jackets and Will shuts his eyes as he stands waiting to resume their conversation. His mind compulsively absorbs the scene before him, zoning in on people at random, and he tries to dismiss the information as soon it registers but he can't. He tries to summon his peaceful fishing stream instead; even a minute there would remove him from the data stream that assaults him now but his stream does not flow. The dead dry riverbed of his inferno threatens to surface and Will opens his eyes to make sure the smoke in his nostrils is really in his head.

His thoughts turn restlessly, associations clinging like damp sheets. He senses his dark companion at his side and though he knows Jack can't see him, the fear that Jack will question his mental state settles flat upon his tongue.

I just want to be careful with you. We don't want to break you here. Is that what's happening? Have I broken you?

Do you have anyone that does this better unbroken than I do broken?

Fear makes you rude, Will.

Will had swallowed his anger at Jack, and his fear that day. Will had endured the psychological attacks from Jack, jibes designed to get him focused, and knowing full well how asking another grown man if he had broken him would affect Will. Will had countered Jack's transparent manipulations that day with a terse response he had thought more honest than Jack had deserved. Jack had known there was something wrong, he had not wanted to deal with it or have it interfere with the investigation or the pursuit of the Ripper.

But Jack had been plenty grateful for Will's empathy when he had wanted or needed to confide in someone about Bella. And as painful as it had been for Will, he had quietly absorbed Jack's fears about not being there for her, his guilt about how he had dreaded coming home every day not knowing how he would find her. Jack had regrets about never having had children. He was full of regrets of missed opportunities that would not come again. Will knows that Jack had loved his wife. The loss is etched into his face. Will knows he sees Bella everywhere he looks. Especially now that he walks along streets that summon memories of their romance in full bloom.

Jack is not an easy man to like. At first, Will had told himself he didn't have to like Jack; he just had to work with him. Soon, he had found himself wanting to like Jack and Will thinks they managed to forge a tenuous camaraderie out of mutual need. Will had found his companionship alternately hot and cold and there had always been the ulterior and unspoken motives for associating with Will in the first place. As Hannibal had pointed out to him one evening after an especially awkward dinner with Alana, Jack had never sat down to the dinner table with him except with Hannibal.

Will admits he likely would not have accepted any dinner invitations, but Jack had never offered. Not once.

Will cannot truly characterize the relationship as friendship, but perhaps it had come close. As close as anything Will had experienced to friendship. Until...

Hannibal had taken the concept of friendship and mangled it, virtually taking the concept apart in his bare hands and by strength of will had fashioned something unique between them. The conditioning and the strategically induced seizures had been multiple means to multiple ends. But he had survived and had retained his sense of self though not his sanity. Will has decided that sanity is a concept that is overrated; its definition and application dependent on one's point of view. Will thinks it entirely possible to be functionally insane. It is a highly subjective and very lonely state of being. Will had not realized he had been lonely in his aloneness until Hannibal.

Jack had often asked if he had pushed too hard or broken Will, his way of making Will prove Jack wrong, and to appease his own sense of guilt for needing him there despite knowing what it was doing to him. He could ask Will if he had broken him and in the same breath absolve himself of all responsibility.

I'm not your father, Will. I'm not gonna tell you what you ought to do.

Seems like that's exactly what you're gonna do.

Jack tugs on Will's tether and Hannibal pulls him back. The pendulum swings. The debate of whether or not Will is a killer has been put to rest. Both Jack and Hannibal had believed him their killer. Will had not wanted to kill either of them and had led both to believe otherwise. He had set them at each other.

I'm wearing a wire. I have sharp shooters on the roofs of neighboring houses with lines of sight to all the windows.

Is it ideal that Jack die?

It's necessary. What happens to Jack has been preordained

I don't need a sacrifice, do you?

Will had wanted to believe that Jack would have taken Hannibal alive. That Hannibal would have surrendered to fight another day. And as he had paced the carpet in the dark at his house, his mind exploding with possible outcomes as the dogs had whined sensing his agitation, he had been overwhelmed with the anticipation of regret. Regret that he had made a terrible mistake. A terrible choice from a menu of unsavory choices.

And then the call from Alana had come. And the parade of squad cars in his driveway. Another unsavory choice. Run or be arrested…again. Arrest had been imminent, but saving one or both of them had been his only thought as he had taken to the woods with only his coat, wallet, phone, and his gun…

Choices. With every creative act comes its destructive consequence.

Both Hannibal and Jack feel betrayed because Will did not choose either of them that night after leading each of them to believe he had. As Will lifts his eyes from the ground to look at Jack, he thinks there had been plenty of betrayal to go around. Jack had had his doubts and Hannibal had known about Lounds.

The stone about his neck sways like the pendulum as he gazes at Jack across the yard. Jack looks up suddenly and gestures he'll be a few more minutes and Will nods as much to Jack as to the ruffling along his collar as talons comb through his hair.

Doubt hovers around Jack like a halo. Like Hannibal, Jack wants his truth this time.

He wants justice. He wants to see you, see who you are. See what I've become. He wants the truth.

To the truth then, and all its consequences…

Despite the mixed up pronouns, there had been truth in what Will had said to Hannibal. Pronouns. Will's breath hitches and he stands motionless while associations twine around his throat. Hannibal had been communicating truth at the dinner table that night and he had mixed up his pronouns, too.

If I confess to Jack Crawford right now…

I would forgive you. If Jack were to tell you all is forgiven, would you accept his forgiveness?

Hannibal had known about Lounds then. He had been suggesting much more than sneaking out of Baltimore that night. He had been offering Will a chance to confess his sins and explain his motives. And Will had sat there sipping his wine, congratulating himself on his cunning. *Pride. Hubris.*

We're just alike…

Will looks across the yard at the ginger haired journalist and wonders again how Hannibal had found out. He forces his thoughts back to the crime scenes and the narratives he must sell to Jack. There is truth in the tableaux if Jack knew where to look for it. Unfortunately for Jack, he is not the intended recipient.

Truth is hidden among the layers of meaning embedded in both the tableaux as it so often had been hidden beneath the deception and lies traded in Hannibal's office. Every mental battle fought from those chairs an exercise in anticipating the other's next move. Every word, every glance exchanges of intimacy, vibrations of molecules in the air they had shared. Inhale. Exhale.

So it is with a disquieting acceptance that Will sees echoes of Hannibal in his own design just as Hannibal has channeled Will into his. In fact, the tableaux complement each other perfectly. One could believe them the work of the same architect or the products of a shared vision conceived and planned ahead of time. Only that's not what happened.

An imago is an image of a loved one, buried in the unconscious, carried with us all our lives. An ideal. The concept of an ideal. I have a concept of you, just as you have a concept of me.

Both tableaux use flesh to disguise and allegory to distort the messages. To find the truth in Hannibal's tableau Will had to look deeper. He had to read between the lines of the well placed allusions. The allusions were misdirection, to be peeled away like peeling away Lucia's skin to reveal her true identity. Will had recognized the double entendre written in flesh immediately.

Hannibal's tableau was majestic in its maliciousness and suitably shocking. Of course Hannibal would emerge from his self-styled exile with excessive flair and style. Lucia had been flayed and displayed as a montage of meat mounted on a frame of bones, a union of human and beast. Hannibal had skinned Lucia not only to allude to the Calydonian Hunt, but to bare Lucia, reveal her true nature in a savage rendering much like Will had memorialized Tier. Except that Tier had envisioned himself a beast in life, Lucia had not. She had been a beast in Hannibal's eyes and her tableau had been a tribute to his own irrefutable and final judgment.

Implicit in the skinless tribute is the invitation to reveal one's true nature, though Will doubts anyone, excepting Daniel, would interpret Hannibal's pointed plea. He thinks Mason might identify with the skinning motif, but beyond obsessing on his own perverse parallel with the luckless Lucia, Mason will be too self-absorbed to think beyond stepping up the time table for his revenge. Hiding and revealing identities is the theme built into Hannibal's tableau.

A vision flashes of Hannibal taking a scalpel to the edges of Lucia's hairline to peel away the subcutaneous layers of skin from Lucia's ice cold flesh like a mask. Hannibal wants Will to see his own mask for what it is. And take it off. For him.

Bitter and yet tasty thoughts have been running around Will's head since walking behind the curtain for the unveiling of Hannibal's theatre. Like the field kabuki he had shown Will with the Nichol's girl, Hannibal has unveiled a negative to show him the positive. Hannibal has revealed himself in his design, taken off his own mask. For Will.

Icarus fell not because he looked up, but because he looked down.

In removing Lucia's mask, Hannibal had embedded a singular message for Will in a detail Will had not mentioned to Jack. Lucia's silver nose ring had been replaced with a larger shiny bronze ring alluding to the practice of rubbing *Il Porcellino*'s snout to ensure a safe return to Florence. The metaphor is clear enough to Will. Hannibal has given Will's return his blessing.

His sin against Hannibal has truly been forgiven. He need only forgive himself and look up to Hannibal once more. His complicity in this venture sets him on a path from which there is no return. Hannibal's faith in him, his trust in him cost Hannibal everything. The life he allowed Will to rob him of is gone. His faith and trust in Will can only be restored if Will too joins him in this new life. Like the Hannibal locked up in BSHCI in his hallucination, this Hannibal also desires for the architect of his ruination to live in the house he built. This is the dark negative cast in Lucia's shadow.

The positive that shines from the light of Lucia's eyes concealed somewhere within the gruesome tableau is not the beacon of escape Will sold to Jack during lunch. The positive is reflected in the affirmation of mutual suffering. Will did change Hannibal and Hannibal has been forced to admit *that* to himself. And because Will has changed him; it is possible for Will to hurt him. A most unsettling thought for a narcissistic psychopath. From opposition comes understanding, kicking and screaming, but it had come to Hannibal like a seismic tremor to shake him out of his conceit and arrogance.

Placing Lucia's eyes so they look within rather than without confirm for Will that Hannibal *has* been twisting in an inferno of his own. His presence in Will's dreamscape, the inner monologue Will has been imagining with him is a manifestation of Hannibal's actual state of mind. Will's subconscious has been collecting and assimilating all the conversations they have ever had since they met, intrusions into his consciousness, a powerful river too quick and treacherous for him to assimilate so the river had flowed straight into his subconscious where the river has continued to flow ever since, winding its way through Will's forts becoming the specters that haunt him.

Will had invited Hannibal in, deliberately assuming his perspective to lure him. But as Will had shown Hannibal what he had wanted to see, so too had Hannibal shown Will what he had wanted Will to see.

I let you know me, see me.

You wanted to be seen.

By you. Only you. Ever…you.

A truth had manifested as Will had talked with Hannibal on the phone after killing Luciano. The truth had become more pronounced as he had worked on his tableau in the depths of Daniel's basement. Will had realized that he had consciously assimilated Hannibal from one perspective. He had put on just one suit. But, his subconscious had absorbed other suits, and those are the suits manifesting in Will's dreamscapes, the same way the stag and later the antler man had stalked him in his dreams. Hannibal has offered him Lucia's eyes to know him, see him yet again.

Hannibal has been remembering conversations, too.

Each of them has condemned themselves to an inferno of their own design for sins committed against each other. Both infernos wells of regret painted with doubt. Will keeps returning to Hannibal's kitchen floor in his dreamscape because it is the entrance to his inferno. The entrance to Hannibal's inferno is also there. No surprise then that both tableaux summon the spirit of Dante, both of them lost in a dark wood where the sun is silent. Each of them has conjured up Dante's *Inferno* for the other and Will thinks of a musical score resting on Hannibal's harpsichord in the salon, Hannibal taking the left hand as he takes the right. Orchestrations of carbon. A melody. Point and counter point.

Lucia is the personification of light, the way in and out of hell; Luciano embodies the Gates of Hell.

But each of them has summoned Dante in his own way. And from this comes the contradictory evidence that will send the FBI scratching its collective head.

Hannibal's raw tribute is singular in its perception, its design expressed in classical terms and bound by its unyielding limitations. Hannibal has placed his tableau in the past by employing traditional perspective, the approach he utilizes in his own drawings. By design it is intended to evoke the past and contain it there. It is indicative of Hannibal's mindset. He has been living in the past, as has Will. Both of them trapped and unable to move on without either reconciling it, or burying it, perhaps literally.

We're just alike…alone without each other.

Will has to admit they think alike. As Will had imagined his own design for Luciano he had found himself imagining Hannibal's design for Lucia. Though he had been as surprised as everyone else at the sight of the fountain he had known, had felt, that Hannibal would be moved to use classical motifs and by extension classical values. Hannibal's universe is vast and epic and a product of his classical education and pursuits.

Will's design required a different approach to evoke the present. Will chose to deconstruct the past and fracture it. Pieces like shards of a shattered tea cup, reduced to essentials, gathered up and reassembled. Cubism allows for seeing multiple perspectives simultaneously, a metaphor for Will himself that Hannibal will not miss. The imagery evoked by Luciano's carefully apportioned and arranged corpse displayed inside the six sided cube of shiny shrouded flesh will not be missed, either.

There are equally provocative planes of imagery for Jack and the FBI. Hannibal and Jack can both look at Will's design, but only one of them will accurately interpret it. Will knows Hannibal has already done so. He had to flip the glass box over to see the side on the ground. He left it flipped. Just for Will.

Jack has an imagination of his own and while Hannibal's universe is situated atop a pinnacle that Jack can't quite reach, Jack has sniffed at it, felt it, and most certainly tasted of it. He had not missed the similarities to Tier and had deliberately waited to see if Will would mention it himself. Will understands that Jack is feeling him out, getting to know him again. Jack's perception of Will is a fluid thing, changing constantly with every moment they spend together. He will drag Daniel off to further supplement his perception eventually, of that Will is certain.

Will is confident that Daniel can handle Jack. If anything, Daniel will remind Jack of a certain teacher at the FBI Academy he used to know, only much more sociable.

Will sees Jack approaching and ambles over to one of the Polizia vans to grab a couple bottles of water from the cooler in back mindful of the cameras pointed in his direction and keeping out of the line of sight. He hopes he can talk with Jack without Pazzi. Pazzi is not in the immediate area, but Will imagines he will show up sooner or later.

Daniel leans against the cool cement wall inside the darkened slaughter pit. Somebody had remembered that rooms get hot when exposed to sunlight and had sealed up the enclosure. Daniel thinks it may have been too little too late. The heat and humidity have been sealed inside as well.

Price and Zeller wipe at the perspiration beads on their foreheads. Daniel watches and listens in amazement as they continue to argue about the stylistic components of Will's design. Zeller will not part with his ten bucks on principle. He believes he is right. His current argument that the tableau is merely representational is based on his inference that Hannibal is the…artist.

"Lecter is not a modern art kind of guy."

"And where do you get that?" Price says, unflustered and unconvinced. "I think staging a murder is pretty post-modern, don't you?"

"His past displays have been performance art…"

“Performance art is modern.”

“But theatricality and drama aren’t. He staged to shock, yeah…but the bodies are always recognizably human.”

“You know Jack is obsessing she looked like Tier.” Price says quietly without looking in Daniel’s direction. “I said to Jack that making another Tier would show a distinct lack of imagination. And we all know Will is not lacking imagination.”

“It must mean something different. Lecter already framed Will for murder once. Will said he thought it was meant as a back handed compliment.”

“He did?”

“Yeah, in the car on the way over. Oh, I forgot. You were in the back of the van.”

“Ten bucks, please.” Price huffs.

“Fuck, no. This…is clearly just the representation of a meat locker, transparent so we can see inside, but a meat locker of wrapped up Verger implied meat. He’s a cannibal for Christ’s sake. Did everyone forget that?”

Daniel pushes off from the wall and walks over to join them. “Um…don’t you think you are forgetting the obvious?”

Zeller looks up from the ground where he has been taking soil samples and Price lifts the magnifying glasses from his eyes.

“What is so obvious?” Zeller asks, face pinched as though waiting for a slap.

“Well, it’s a *cube*. From what I know of Lecter, he liked puns, didn’t he?”

Zeller nods slowly. “A literal pun expressed in 3D?”

“Thank you!” Price says, grinning at Daniel. “Pay up Zee, or I’ll tell everyone you squelched.”

“It can’t be that simple.” Zeller says.

“Why not? Why not make you guys run around trying to match it to the other one?” Daniel says.

“No, now wait a minute. Lecter also thinks he’s smarter than everyone else. If this is cubism, what is it supposed to represent besides Luciano? There are at least six Luciano’s represented here, thanks to the pig parts.”

“Cubism is about looking at the individual pieces.” Price says.

“Lecter went through all this trouble to compose a portrait of Luciano? Cubism is about rearranging the pieces to compose a picture.”

“That’s if you were talking about a two dimensional space like a painting.”

Will’s voice sounds from the entrance and Daniel looks up to see Will and Jack standing in the doorway, two silhouettes against the streaming sunlight at their backs.

“Sculpture is different. It is already three dimensional, the goal of cubism already achieved.” Will hands off a bottle of water to Daniel before he continues, “Cubism challenges traditional perception because it is conceptual. This...is like panels of seemingly randomly arranged pieces of several Luciano’s; but they are actually sections of a whole...concept.”

“A cubist work invites the eye to look at each piece individually. Each piece here is wrapped so you don’t miss the point.” Price says. “It’s almost thoughtful. Keeps the meat from spoiling too quickly.”

Daniel walks over to stand near Will and Jack. He finds himself compulsively trying to account for all of Luciano contained in the shimmering panes of glass. It is repulsive and upsetting and you can’t tear your eyes away from it. The mind wants to reassemble it. Daniel admits it presents a stunning if not completely mad effect.

And Will did this without drugs.

“It’s like turning him inside out. To show what’s inside.” Zeller says.

Will nods. “We’ve seen this sectioning before, except it was more a still life…”

“Beverly.” Jack says. “This recalls the glass panes of Beverly’s tableau, but instead of slices under a microscope, looking inside for evidence, these are panels looking out.”

“Looking out and looking down. A cubist rendering of Dante’s *Inferno*, Jack.”

“Diverging vantage points of a literary work?”

“Of another work of art that conceptualizes a literary work.”

Jack frowns and the creases are deep along his jaw. “Is everyone here an art critic, but me? Show me what you are talking about, Will. What do you see?”

Will keeps his head down, averts his eyes so he doesn’t have to meet the gaze of anyone else as he kneels down in front of the encased Luciano.

“Hannibal has been to France and has likely seen the original. Probably made a special trip. This tableau points to Rodin’s Gates of Hell.”

Will knows Hannibal has seen it. He had photographs of it. Photographs he had taken himself and had mounted on linen matting boards and framed in hand carved black onyx. Will had been wandering around Hannibal’s house one night, too wired to sleep and had found them along with scores of other framed prints stored on the third floor, in one of the rooms Hannibal did not keep locked…

Price crosses his arms and Daniel watches him tongue the pen in his mouth thoughtfully rolling it from side to side. Jack notices too and Price withdraws the pen.

“A brilliant deduction, Will, but I’m not seeing it, either.” Price says.

“Me, neither.” Zeller says.

“Bear with me minute. And I’m not a hundred percent sure about this, but it seems to fit with what he has introduced already in Lucia. Figuring out Lucia relied on associations with location. This relies on associations with the images to find the location of the inspiration and the meaning. Like Lucia, he represents other figures, characters in the drama. Cubism distorts reality in time and space. So while we "see" Luciano for the pig he is, he's only one fragment of what we're meant to see."

"How many fragments could there be?" Jack says.

"Um…a cube has six sides, Jack." Will says, unable to resist.

Jack purses his lips and then rubs at his whiskers. "So what points to Rodin?"

Will points to the three hooves wrapped in shiny cellophane visible in the glass he kneels beside. They are grouped like a trinity, all three hooves angled downward toward a singular point.

"This one for starters. He has referenced the Three Shades sculpture that sits at the top of Rodin's gate. There are three sets of eyes on this side."

"That's quite a leap, Will."

"If it was just the one side I would agree with you. But, if you look at the individual pieces like Price said, and if you know the poses of the sculptures in Rodin's gate, then it makes sense."

Price leans over Will's shoulders and peers into the glass. He hovers a few seconds and then circles the entire cube hunched over as he walks.

"You know, Jack, I think he's right. I see the Thinker here, too. And maybe The Kiss…"

"The Kiss?" Jack nearly spits.

"The Kiss was not in the final version." Will says. "Rodin removed it. Put other lovers in like Paolo and Francesca, *less happy* couples."

"Right, right." Price says. "So many of the sculptures for this have been reproduced as major works in their own right that it gets a bit confusing. Paolo is chasing Francesca." Price looks at Jack, raises his brows suggestively.

Jack looks to Will who sighs, "In Dante's version they are forever caught in a wind for their excessive passion. Same with Rodin." Will folds his arms over his chest. "He's not *chasing* her."

"So, he reaches for her…for all eternity." Jack says.

"Very romantic." Price agrees.

"The entire *Gates of Hell* are drenched in Romanticism. It's Gothic, like Byron and Shelley." Will says.

Price nods in agreement. "The point of Rodin's piece was to show how hell already exists on earth. We create our own conflicts and thus condemn ourselves."

"How do you know all this shit?" Zeller says. Price ignores him in favor of his brushes.

"We can be in hell before and after death." Will says.

“Oh, I think this one is supposed to be Ugolino eating his children…” Price says as Zeller leans down for a better look.

“What’s his point? That we are all in hell?” Jack says, rolling his eyes.

“Could be that. We are all in Dante’s *Inferno* already, or headed there.”

“Or Hannibal’s inferno.” Jack says tartly.

Will suppresses a bitter smile. “We need to identify the remaining sides, see which figures and which stories he is pointing to. But Jack, there is a warning in this one.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Oh…let me…” Price says grinning his ass off. “The Three Shades point to the inscription over the gates. The inscription is taken directly from Dante’s poem. *Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”*

“The shades represent the souls of the damned who *have* to pass through the gates to enter.” Will says.

Will rubs at his jaw. He should thank Price for his help. He has now ensured that Price and Zeller will argue for days over which sculptures are represented on the sides of the cube, long after the pieces are unwrapped, analyzed, and photographed. The best part is it doesn’t matter what they come up with. Will only needed to sell the concept. And they have clearly bought it. Even Jack.

Jack circles the glass box again, jaw set as thoughts churn. Will can see his grim expression reflected in the glass at every turn.

“And we can choose not to. Before it is too late. Hannibal is telling us to abandon our hunt for him. More destruction awaits.” Jack says. “Somebody get me an image of *The Gates of Hell* on a laptop. NOW.”

Everyone pauses while Price and Zeller turn to their lab assistants. Two of them scramble outside to a van to procure the all-seeing eye of Google for the bellowing Menelaus.

“And why the Thinker? You and Jimmy agree on that one?” Jack says after a moment.

Will and Price both nod at Jack. Daniel marvels at Will’s gift for manipulation. Crawford continues to ask questions, giving nothing away. Daniel figures Will is used to his façade of skepticism since he doesn’t seem concerned. Then again, Will would not appear as anything but the oracle of obscurity Jack expects him to be.

Jack suspects Will has his own agenda and Will knows he suspects. Will also knows Jack wants to believe he is playing his role of lure, the other silent role he was sent here to play. Daniel realizes that Jack does not yet understand there is no lure. He swims between two sharks.

“His head is here. Well, most of it. This is the only side where Luciano’s hands appear. His own hands. And they have been posed in rigor to copy the hands of the Thinker.”

“Who is the Thinker supposed to be?”

“The pose is iconic. It is believed that Rodin placed Dante himself over the cornice to look down at his work.”

Price looks up from cleaning his fingernails. “Or…it’s Adam contemplating his sins and by extension all sin.”

“Rodin removed Adam and Eve from his gates.” Will says.

“He removed a particular pair of Adam of Eve. Couldn’t finish Eve. The model got pregnant.”

“What difference does it make?” Jack says, his mood souring by the second.

“That would change the meaning.” Will says. “No Adam and Eve, no sin. If that is Dante, or even Rodin himself at the top that would suggest there is no heaven either.”

“What? You’re saying that because there’s no heavenly personification in the judgment seat there’s no judgement, no consequence. The Thinker is another mortal presiding over the gate.” Price says. “Unless it is Adam.”

“Adam is mortal too. But, it depends on who Hannibal thought it was.” Will says.

“Then that means there is no hell? That contradicts the warning.” Zeller says.

“It certainly challenges it. Rodin has taken Dante and flipped him around. This tableau takes Rodin and reduces him to a Picasso. A reduction of Dante’s *Inferno* to its essential elements and reimagining it as a parody. Like Lucia was a parody of *Il Porcellino*.”

“Is that his heart in there?” Price cranes his neck twisting his head nearly upside down to peer inside the glass tomb.

“Enough!” Jack says, rubbing at his temples. “It’s another reference to the *Inferno.* We’ll eventually sort it out.

Price scratches at his nose, flicks the dust away and begins to circle Luciano’s glass tomb behind Jack. He pauses to stand beside Jack.

“You know…Rodin became quite the sensualist, Jack. Got to reading Baudelaire while he worked on this. Changed his perspective. Originally, his gates were supposed to mirror Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise on the Baptistery’s doors here in Florence. He removed the block framing of the Renaissance doors and created this tableau of twisting figures in an undefined ocean of space instead.”

“Baudelaire?” Zeller says, “He wrote some scandalous stuff, didn’t he?”

Price nods enthusiastically, “Oh yeah…lots of sexual content, comes close to cannibalism. You know…eating someone…”

Zeller takes out his phone while Price angles his head to have a better look. Daniel bites at his lip. He knows the poem Price is referring to. *Le Monstre* was one of the poems that had gotten Baudelaire arrested and into trouble with the Ministry of the Interior for corrupting the public. Daniel thinks several of his poems had been banned clear up to the Second World War.

Will’s mind conjures the image of Rodin’s famous Gates, as he does the figures swimming in the firmament of Rodin’s creation assume the faces of the people lost in his pursuit of Hannibal. The faces of Abigail, Beverly, Alana, even Tier, squirm along the doors in his imagination, only now they are the huge bronze doors of Ghiberti, but his Gates of Paradise remain closed to the wailing writhing bodies that crawl along its frame only to drop one by one into a smoky abyss. Alia's tear stained face appears and Will opens his eyes before Daniel joins her.

"Thinker could refer to Hannibal." Will says, "Sees himself as a poet replacing God as judge just as Rodin put Dante up there."

"I still think Adam…" Price says, sticking the pen back in his mouth. "Look at his hands…" Price stops at the warning look from Jack. He sighs and wipes at the sweat trickling down the side of his face.

Will thinks Price has no idea how right he is, but for the wrong reason. The hands do evoke Adam, but that message is for Hannibal and has nothing at all to do with Rodin or his gates. Only one side of the tableau was meant for Hannibal. The other five sides are all for the FBI. Rodin and Baudelaire should keep them occupied. Just like the Calydonian Boar Hunt and the *Iliad*.

Daniel sips at the water Will brought him as he watches Will lead them masterfully where he wants them to go. Hannibal…would be proud.

"What's Baudelaire got to do with this? As if it needed to be anymore convoluted." Jack looks to Will who looks to Price.

"Rodin was fascinated by Baudelaire's poems, particularly his *Fleurs du Mal*." Price says.

"Flowers of Evil?" Jack says. "Which figures point to that…literary reference?"

"All of them." Will says. "All his figures twist in eternity, victims of their own passions, lost in sins of the flesh."

"Meaning what?"

"Rodin's meaning or Hannibal's?" Will says.

Jack rubs at his face. It is getting warmer by the minute and the added heat of all the bodies in the room continues to compromise the tableau. It will soon feel like a sauna inside the slaughter pit.

"Just give me a short version, very short. I've got to move this thing soon."

"Rodin had no religious purpose in mind. He took Dante's version and used it as a frame of reference for lamenting the decline of morality in general and the dangers of unsated desire. A contradiction since Rodin was an epic skirt chaser. Penance for enjoying Baudelaire so much." Will says with a wry twist of his lips.

"So he identified with Baudelaire. Used him as inspiration to capture the age of decadence he lived in."

"Oh, big time." Price chimes in. "The sculptures are so erotic. Reminds me of Mappelthorpe."

Will and Jack both glare at Jimmy for different reasons, but their expressions stun him to silence. Daniel is astonished at this peek behind the curtain of the FBI's vaunted Behavioral Psychology Unit.

"Yes. Used him as inspiration." Will says, turning back to Jack, "Hannibal enjoys turning things around. If he placed himself at the top of the gates, he is not God, but Satan. One of Baudelaire's flowers was entitled *The Litanies of Satan*."

"Oh, c'mon. This could go on endlessly. How many "flowers" did Baudelaire write?"

"He celebrates man's evils in over a hundred little ditties." Will says.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but is there an allusion to the *Iliad* here, any classical references like Lucia's?" Jack looks to Will, Will looks aside, and Daniel picks up his cue.

"Since you asked…" Daniel says as all eyes turn to him. "It's vague but worth mentioning since it could allude to your present relationship with him and how he sees himself in relation to you."

"This ought be good." Zeller says, arms folded across his chest.

"In Book Five there's this huge battle. Achilles is not in it, but nearly everyone else is. It's the part in the story where even the gods have been drawn into the battle, which up to that point was between the mortals. But Hades is attacked at the gates of hell, his domain, and he goes right to Olympus to whine about his wound and complain to Zeus about it. Things really heat up after that."

"And this is relevant because…"

"Another warning." Will says. "It is hubris to approach the gods with spears."

Will stands outside with Pazzi, not by choice. Jack is inside one of the FBI vans, getting the updates Will has to stand around and wait for. Pazzi nods to the green van that pulls up, stomps out his cigarette.

"Let's go get something to eat. I called a catering company to come out. Only Firenze's best for the FBI, eh? We should go before the masses come and beat us to it."

Will shrugs and follows him over to the van, craning his neck to look for Daniel. Daniel has to be starving about now. They have been here for a couple hours. His stomach rumbles with hunger and too much caffeine. Daniel ate even less than he did at lunch. Will knows many of the people working here have been here much longer than he has without a break. There does seem to be a collective turn in the tide of people toward the van.

"Something spicy." Pazzi says to the girl arranging the large trays of wrapped sandwiches at the back of the van on a fold out table. "Salami, whatever you got."

The brown haired beauty stops what she is doing, glances at Pazzi's badge and begins searching through the trays.

Pazzi takes a sandwich from the lovely signorina, smiling broadly at her, his hands lingering a little too long as he slides his fingers along hers, wedding band gleaming in the sunlight. He turns to Will and unwraps the sandwich, holding it up to Will like a toast as the plastic wrapping falls to the ground.

"I'll never look at shrink wrap the same again, eh?" Pazzi bites down on the roll, pulling chunks of tomato, provolone cheese, and salami into his mouth.

Will stoops to pick up the trash; tosses it in the waiting receptacle and peruses his choices in the boxes of sandwiches and chips that are arranged on the table. He finds a tray of tuna salad on chiabatta bread in the back and grabs a bag of chips. Both of them grab bottles of iced tea from the ice filled cooler.

He follows Pazzi over to a squad car so they can put down their drinks and lunch on the hood while they lean against the bumper as they eat. Will still sees no sign of Daniel and thinks maybe he should have grabbed a sandwich for him. He does see Jack, however. Jack is heading toward them with purpose. Will thinks forensics has finally found something worth the walk over.

"Okay, here's what we have so far. Lucia's eyes were embedded in the…I hesitate to call it a corpse, but they found both eyes. In her heart. He took all the other organs and left the heart. Any thoughts, Will?"

Will chews slowly as he thinks Hannibal left her heart for the same reason he left Luciano's. If the brain is the symbol for reason, the heart represents emotion. To place Lucia's eyes inside her heart emphasizes all the conversations they had had about allowing himself to become intimate with his instincts. Hannibal wants him to see his emotions, his impulses for what they are. But, Hannibal's sense of humor has made an appearance in a particularly awkward and problematic way. On purpose.

"A rejection."

"Perhaps you didn't hear me. I said the heart was left inside. Her eyes stuffed in it like a couple cuff links in a cushion."

"Or a ring…" Pazzi mumbles from beside Will.

Jack looks at Pazzi, raises a brow, but turns back to Will. Will lifts his head, not in challenge but because he knows what's about to come out of Jack's mouth.

"It does seem like a token of…affection, Will."

"That's a trite interpretation and worse, presumptive. It's rejection, Jack. Not fit for the table."

Pazzi stops chewing. Will swallows down his morsel of tuna sandwich with iced tea and reaches in the Lay's bag for more chips. Jack stands with feet apart arms folded across his chest, skepticism written all over his face.

"Based on what?"

"Based on the model of rejection in Genesis. God rejected Cain's sacrifice because it was not righteous. Her heart was not pure. Neither was Luciano's." Will tosses the potato chips in his mouth.

"Why a Biblical parallel? There are no sacrifices here."

"Flipping traditional values is what he does. He exists in a universe apart from rules. You could say the twins were sacrificed to get to him. His narcissism entitles him to pass judgement. Gods consume the sacrifices made to them. He turned his nose up. Luciano's heart is wrapped up in that box, I guarantee it."

“Will, you seem to have a ready answer for just about everything. It’s a little too convenient…”

“Was it convenient I got gutted, Jack? Because anytime my *intimate* knowledge becomes too uncomfortable for you, I’ll just keep it to myself.”

Jack turns and paces, rubs at his neck. A familiar gesture of frustration from Jack, but a reminder that Will isn’t the only one bearing scars from their association with Hannibal. He turns back to Will and his large brown eyes linger on Will’s face. Will endures the scrutiny because he has to. He waits while Jack considers the extent of his intimate compromises and not for the first time. Jack looks at him with this particular expression often. Probably wondering just how much compromise was involved.

“The sacrifice angle does work, but he usually eats them *because* they offended him somehow. I think trying to kill him qualifies as offensive…to Hannibal.”

“Lucia worked for Mason.” Will looks up at Jack and waits for him to make the connection. He does.

“Right. Another link to the mysterious Verger drama. This thing with Mason….”

The rest of Jack’s thought evaporates as his lips press together tightly. Will knows he won’t press in front of Pazzi. At least the condescending Polizia captain is good for something.

“Mason has been blowing up my phone all day. Keeps reading Lounds’ updates. And Will, I’m asking you not to look at her blog, at least wait until later.”

“I think I’ve got enough on my plate.”

“Funny, what’s he doing with the rest of her organs?”

“No idea. They didn’t fit the design. I told you to look up Sardinian recipes. What else did forensics have?”

“Still analyzing soil samples. Waiting for the lift to get here for the uh…art.”

Jack’s phone beeps and the grimace indicates it must be Mason. He shakes his head and walks back toward the FBI van.

“So…he puts the eyes in her heart. It was a love letter after all.”

“I’ll just take it home and stick it in the oven. Wait for the chocolates to arrive.”

Pazzi cracks a grin before he takes a drink of his iced tea. He nods to himself as he wipes the dribble from his beard.

“You said he loved you for your mind. Another joke, I know, but…” Pazzi begins, dipping his fingers into his bag of chips as he speaks.

“That…wasn’t a joke.”

“Okay. He was fascinated by this thing you do. You know his mind. And you use how you think to catch him. You go undercover. You let him know you, too. You killed to get him to trust you.”

“I did.” Will says.

“You went undercover so deep you crawled into bed with him. You let him get into your head. But you got too close.”

“Too close, yes.”

“So close you didn’t expect him to stab you.”

“What’s your point?”

“He’s a killer. A cannibal. But, he’s human. He knows you might be here, helping out. You are the expert on him. I know he sent you messages in those bodies. Messages for us, yes…but you, too. What else besides the heart?”

“I explained the heart, but I wouldn’t put it past him to stick something special in there for me. I’m still working on it. I’m not feeling any love yet.”

“You been here what, four months now?”

“Sounds about right.”

“You’ve been in therapy with Clayton the whole time?”

“That is a little more recent.”

“Everything I’ve read or heard about you says you are unstable.”

“Oh, that’s just because they don’t know what else to call me.”

Pazzi gives him a hard look and as Will looks back into Pazzi’s face, his gift activates a cascade of associations. The expensive cologne, applied too heavily assails Will’s nostrils. He dyes his hair and beard to cover the encroaching grey. He wears a diamond stud in one ear. His nails are manicured and his clothes are not off the bargain rack. The hair and the attire combine to comprise a calculated aura of cool. All of these things betray Pazzi’s materialistic inclinations. He aspires to be like the man he sees in his mind, not the reality he sees in the mirror every morning and he needs to convince everyone else the man in his mind is real.

But his salary is insufficient to accommodate Pazzi’s desires and his bank account must suffer for it. The creases etched into his forehead are not from the pressures of his occupation, but of his insolvency. Pazzi is making assumptions about Will, too. Will can only wait and see if Pazzi’s training and instincts will prevail over his misplaced conceits. For now, his estimation of Will seems to be a work in progress.

“You sent the Paolini to dig up dirt on him. What did they find?”

“We’ll never know. Whatever they found got taken from them. Must have been troubling enough to register on his radar.”

“Maybe we can retrace their steps? Recreate what they lost?”

“It would take weeks, but go ahead, put a couple of your people on it to poke around. He may not notice this time since he’s too busy sending love letters.”

“You know, you’re not very helpful for a guy who claims to want to catch him.”

Will stands up straight, flips the crumbs off the lapels of his blazer as he looks at Pazzi.

“I’ll go be helpful now back at the FBI van, then.”

He turns to go, but Pazzi has a parting shot.

“All that evidence, all that analyzing you did? Both crime scenes…*è una cagata*.”

“I wish it were a load of shit, Pazzi. And so should you. This is the killer who replaced a city councilman’s organs with toxic plants growing out of his completely exposed torso while his body provided the fertilizer to grow him into one of the trees he had cut down for his parking lot. This killer is not lacking in imagination.”

“That…is pretty fucked up. Look, I have been doing this a long time. This…these crime scenes feel contrived.”

Will nods and takes a couple steps to close the space between them. Rather than continue on the offensive, Will decides to disarm Pazzi.

“It is staged. I’ve profiled a lot of his other murder tableaux before these. You investigate and process homicides. When you are dealing with serial killers, the playbook goes out the window. I…understand wanting to disregard the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable. I have to make myself look. It’s why I am in therapy.”

Pazzi is quiet. Will has revealed vulnerability, weakness. This appeals to Pazzi’s vanity and to his sympathy. Will can use both. He hopes to invite a sense of reciprocity, and if not that, then Will will settle for something that approaches camaraderie. He needs Pazzi to see him as a person, not a freak.

“You are a very complicated man, Mr. Graham. D’Angelo and Ruggerio told me a little about you. I think you want to do the right thing, but you have been compromised.”

“I would have to agree with that.”

“*Bene.* You are in a very bad position here.”

“I don’t think bad quite covers it.”

“Do you know about the reward?” Pazzi says quietly.

“What…reward?”

“There is a reward for Lecter’s capture on the internet. Anonymous benefactor, of course. So much money if you give information that pans out. More money if you help with capturing him.”

“How much money?”

“Double what I make for information. Half a million for the assist.”

“Sounds like an appeal to law enforcement. Instant pension. You should tell Jack about this.”

“You should wonder why he didn’t tell you. Who do you think told me?”

All Will can do is nod. He knows it’s Mason. The Paolini must be in on it. They would never allow their services to be sub-contracted unilaterally. And now, factious finger-pointing among the Greeks. Will thinks he should stop thinking that things can’t get any worse. Pazzi shoves the last bit of sandwich in his mouth and waves to Alia and Ruggerio who are waiting in line at the catering van. He pats Will on the shoulder as he leaves him to join his detectives. Will heads toward the FBI van, and Jack.

* * *

The view of the crime scene from atop the withered and brown grass covered hill reminds Hannibal of an anthill. As he removes the binoculars from his eyes he thinks busy bees in a hive might be the more accurate metaphor. The sight of darting dark jackets marked with the bright yellow lettering of the FBI does resemble a swarm of bothersome bees. Bothersome, but necessary.

He walks the perimeter of the abandoned property wearing the uniform of the Polizia. He had borrowed the outfit, jacket, and badge from one of the taller heavier built officers assigned to patrol the crime scene in anticipation of gate crashers. The swarthy young Italian now lies hog-tied beyond the next hill… sunbathing.

Gate crashing would seem to be an appropriate analogy for what he imagines Will is dealing with below. The allusions with which Will has seen fit to endow his creation are apropos but likely a challenging sell. The doubts Jack harbors about Will will bloom in the light cast from both tableaux. Satisfaction swells in his chest as Hannibal thinks of Will’s imagination taxed to its limits as he anticipates and responds to Jack’s pointed inquiries and accusations.

If one learns his limitations too soon, he never learns his power.

Hannibal has served up quite the tasty dish for Will to digest and regurgitate to Jack. This was intentional. Hannibal has no reservations about Will’s ability to sell a plate of platitudes to Jack. The concern lies in whether or not Jack is sufficiently soured on the taste. Suspicion and doubt are necessary ingredients if Will is to finally rinse away the residue of his former associations with the FBI. He must cleanse his palate to better savor the sensations that tempt and tantalize.

The message left in Lucia’s heart should arouse the requisite suspicion within Jack. Jack knows too much to dismiss his instincts easily despite whatever plausible explanation Will provides. It is Will’s reaction to Hannibal’s overture that had caused the wound in his chest to throb with anticipation. Although conveying his intentions to Will is necessary; doing so was a gamble. Will could yet again use his empathy to exploit the honesty expressed in Lucia’s tableau rather than turn that empathy on himself. Will’s capacity for denial is unparalleled. So infuriating…his Will.

But, Hannibal has since seen Will’s tableau. The sight of Luciano’s mottled and swollen heart crisply wrapped and lodged between his hands had soothed the raw wound. Will has sent his own message signaling a truce between them. The question remains whether or not the message was sent in hopeful anticipation or crafted manipulation.

All in good time, Hannibal reminds himself. Plenty of opportunity awaits as the Trojans plot their assault. Patroclus will again join Achilles on the field of battle soon enough. If the messages Hannibal’s sees in the vessel of Luciano’s remains speak truth, Hannibal faces choices, too.

Achilles had left Patroclus to suffer the consequences of his choice of armor once before. If the Trojans come for Patroclus while he wears his own armor, Achilles doubts he could leave him again.

Hannibal had arrived early and taken out his target almost immediately. The young officer had not been at his post for five minutes before Hannibal had relieved him of his professional identity. Assuming an air of quiet confidence, he had walked back down the hill to join the ranks of Greeks already gathering.

The interior of the slaughter pit where Will had deposited his tableau had not even been under guard. A curtain, much like the one with which he had surrounded Lucia, had been drawn around it by the Polizia as they had tried to keep gawking to a minimum before the FBI arrived. Still, the compulsion to gaze the horrific is universal. Every so often one of the officers would step behind the curtain to have a gander at the ghastly. Hannibal had politely waited his turn.

An atmosphere of awe had surrounded him, mouths agape and eyes riveted to the curtains concealing the chamber of glass and the slices of flesh swathed in cellophane inside. Approaching the transparent tomb had been easy, and turning it over with a gloved hand easier still, the thought to do so having not penetrated yet the sight had been so…compelling.

Hannibal had been astounded at the blasé attitudes of both the FBI and Polizia personnel. He had expected more alert and attuned individuals in the employ of institutions dedicated to public safety. As it was, he had left the slaughter pit and had walked right past a pony-tailed Polizia officer holding a briefing bearing his likeness. He had walked right past all of them invisible as a breeze.

To Hannibal's thinking, the wrapping does lend a post-modern feel to Will's piece, the convenience of wrapped meat in the market evokes Verger's meat packing business. Impersonal, mass produced, and…tasteless. Visually, the cellophane captures the light causing the glass box to glitter reflected light behind the light reflected in the glass as the viewer is reflected too and drawn into the box of body parts to become a part of it.

Hannibal decides Will's gifts are not limited to his empathy. Despite the restrictions of time and available resources Will's vision is effective and uniquely his. The unrestrained savagery expressed in Tier's monument had been in tribute to the creature it was meant to enshrine. Will has made no monument here. If anything, Luciano's tableau marks the emergence of self-actualization. It is Will's design and he has placed his signature on it.

The savagery in Luciano's tableau is restrained, quietly contained within glass. Perhaps Will had imagined the screaming in his head would subside once he had sealed it up. Regardless, the grisly glass cube at once appeals to intellect and emotion. It is meant to be looked at, analyzed and taken apart. Mechanic that he is, Will's inclination toward engineering and math no doubt played a part in his choice of expression.

Will's first message to Hannibal had been expressed with simple geometry in the placement of the body parts. A pattern emerged upon reflection. Will had included arcs within each side of his tableau; elliptic arcs that curved toward each other and, if the trajectories were continued beyond the confines of the box, would intersect.

We are just alike. You're as alone as I am. And we're both alone without each other.

Will had also anticipated running two narratives at once and had cleverly used the one meant for the FBI to introduce the other. Their discussions of good and evil had touched on many things including Dante and Rodin. Will had poured over the photographs Hannibal had taken of Rodin’s famous *Gates*, and related sculptures, his admiration evident in the serene expression on his face as he had gazed at the prints, kneeling on the floor in a pair of Hannibal’s pajamas.

Will had noticed the hands of Rodin’s *Adam* mirrored the hands of Adam and God in Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam*, Hannibal’s own rendering of the celebrated painting hanging downstairs in his storage room off the kitchen. He had commented that the inclusion had been a brilliant and touching tribute by Rodin.

Will had remembered that particular evening, and others in the salon and found inspiration there, and has used his *Thinker* to advance his chosen narrative for the FBI and to introduce the embedded narrative intended for Hannibal solely within the hands. Adam's hands. Will continues to amaze and delight.

Once Hannibal had been able to view all six sides he had quickly concluded that save for the side, or frame as it were, containing Luciano’s hands and heart, the remaining sides were inconsequential, designed to waste time and effort, to confuse and to misdirect. Knowing that Hannibal’s time to view his work would be limited, Will had limited his message to one straight forward frame.

The multiplicity of the design is a metaphor for Will himself, emphasizing his gift. Like Will, the cube assumes multiple perspectives simultaneously and signals to Hannibal that Will is seeking to look beyond the linear, to move beyond the past.

But it is the single frame containing the hands and heart that tugs at Hannibal now. Will keeps his sentimentality behind frowns and sarcasm. It glistens occasionally in pale blue eyes to streak down a stubbly cheek. To find it encased within his tableau is a beautiful thing.

How fitting that Will chose to frame his dialogue with Hannibal using hands. The symbolism could not have been more perfect. Will had known the memories he would awaken in Hannibal at the sight of Luciano’s hands damaged and posed as they are. The knuckles of Luciano’s right hand had been deliberately scraped raw, a reminder of that circle of violence and intimacy they shared over Tier.

The circle of violence and intimacy had surfaced while bathing and dressing Will’s wounds at his dining room table.

Did you kill him with your hands?

It was intimate.

It deserves intimacy.

And later, after they had showered from setting up Will’s monument at the museum, sitting on the edge of his bed, Hannibal had dressed his wounds again. Hannibal had drawn his thumb tenderly over the bandages…

This is the perfect symbol of your desire for violence and intimacy.

Is it? I would think dressing wounds in the nude was pretty intimate.

Hands are the instruments of creation and destruction. The hands in his tableau are also a reminder that Hannibal's hands had both loved him and hurt him. The gestures of the hands point to the forgiveness Hannibal desires, just as Will's *Thinker* points to Adam and his creator.

In Michelangelo's *Creation*, Adam reclines on the rocks of his earthly existence, extending his hand toward the hand of God that reaches toward him from the clouds of heaven. Will has posed Luciano's hands the same way. His left hand is open in invitation; finger extended waiting to accept the touch of his creator who extends his right hand toward Adam, finger also extended bridging the gap between heaven and earth.

The left hand of Luciano represents Adam, the creation. The right hand represents his creator.

Luciano functions as a representation of Will, the gestures of his hands alluding to Will's acceptance of being both the created and the creator. He is expressing his willingness to accept his becoming, to assume the avatar of Shiva, to embrace and follow his inspirations for what they are. As for the heart...

And…would you eat my heart?

I would rip it from your chest and eat it raw and bleeding from my hands.

Hannibal remembers that dinner well. Will has made his offering. Hannibal could not be more pleased.

He sighs as he looks down upon the Greeks scattered around the abandoned structures below. With divinity comes great obligation. And Hannibal feels a staggering amount of obligation at the moment. The Trojans are quiet and have not dared breach the walls today, but Achilles must have words with his Patroclus. Unfortunately, he is surrounded by Greeks. Achilles will have to use his phone.

Jack is not in the van when Will pokes his head inside. He is told Jack left a few minutes ago, looking for him. Will thinks they must have missed each other while Jack had been talking on the phone and he had been chatting with Pazzi. He has not seen Daniel in a while either. The thought occurs to him that Jack may have cornered Daniel in the slaughter pit and he may be in need of rescuing.

He looks out over the expanse of journalists and photographer still milling about behind the police lines, vultures seeking scraps of juicy meat. There is no telling how many FBI agents or Polizia officers have dropped tid-bits this afternoon. Lounds' carrot top is conspicuously absent, surely a portent of disaster. As he runs his fingers through damp locks of hair that stubbornly remain on his forehead his attention is drawn to the flock of dark birds, crows he thinks, circling the low hills in the distance.

The birds hover above the ground, and Will sees a lone figure walking down the hill right into the path of the flocking birds. Feathers rustle beside him and the weight of wings settles along his shoulders as the creature nestles closer. He watches the figure, clearly wearing a Polizia jacket, walk through the sea of black, completely unaffected by the large birds closely following him and Will realizes the birds are hallucinations.

Will glances to his right, movement registering in his periphery, his senses suddenly tingling with alarm as Ruggerio and Alia catch sight of him and wave. Will groans inwardly as they change direction and move to intercept him across the yard. Will moves cautiously to distance himself from the agents around him to stand by the fence that runs around the property.

Will glances back at the now recognizable figure advancing down the hill. He has stopped at the bottom of the hill and has raised his binoculars to his eyes.

Hannibal…

Hannibal holds the binoculars to his eyes, and Will stands still so Hannibal can get a bead on him. His stomach roils and saliva turns bitter in his mouth but he feels surprisingly calm as he gazes at the statuesque figure across the yard. He seems slimmer than when Will last saw him, though his peculiarly rigid posture is familiar enough. His face is in shadow, the Polizia cap obscuring his features as he intended.

He looks like the Polizia officer he is supposed to appear to be. Hannibal's brazenness never ceases to amaze Will. Thoughts of the owner of Hannibal's current attire surface briefly, but Will can't do anything about that now.

Will glances back to his right. He sees Ruggerio and Alia have located him and are again advancing quickly on his position at the perimeter by the fence. Whatever Hannibal plans on doing, Will thinks he had better do it quickly.

Seeming to read his mind, Hannibal slowly raises his phone into the air as he drops the binoculars to look around. Satisfied he is not being observed, he raises the binoculars to his eyes once more. Will turns his back to him, looks around at the agents until he is certain they are paying him no mind. He raises his hand to rub the back of his neck with two fingers. When he turns around Hannibal is gone.

Hannibal stands in shadow in the woods that encroach upon the abandoned property allowing Will the time he needs to insulate himself in a secure location, far from the eyes and ears that would condemn them both. The phone call places Will at risk, but Hannibal has determined the need outweighs the risk. Apparently, Will agrees.

He phones Will and waits and is surprised at the relief that courses unrestrained as Will's voice melts into his ears after several very long seconds.

"You just can't help yourself, can you."

"Hello, Will." Hannibal pauses, "Bad time?"

"Not much time, I'm afraid." Will says a little more gently this time.

"Tell me, Will. Did the tableaux speak to you?"

"With noise and clarity."

"Messages sent and received, then… I'll be quick. The situation with the Trojans has become more complicated. Antenor is offering a reward on the internet."

“I just found out myself. How did you…You contacted the site yourself. Of course. Had to know first-hand how much, didn’t you. Quite a chunk of change for you.”

“Modesty prevails…” Hannibal pauses to enjoy the soft grunt from Will, “I suppose it is sufficient incentive for someone earning a salary a fraction of that amount.”

“Like a…Greek?”

“Police…or FBI. Would Menelaus…”

“Menelaus wants to give his broken pony room to operate. Wants to believe the pony will get him close enough to cut the pony loose.”

“To put him back in the stable or…lose him?”

“I’m working on that.”

“So, the Greeks and the Trojans are working together.”

“Possibly. Could be Menelaus and Antenor, but there is another general at play. Pazzi.”

“An old name here in Florence. He is the Polizia captain, the tall bearded man.”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember your Renaissance history? The Medici?

“Yes, I do. Lorenzo and Giuliano were attacked in the Cathedral of Florence by the Pazzi. Giuliano was killed but Pazzi was eventually executed as a traitor to Florence for seeking the riches of papal Rome.”

“I believe we have our Agamemnon. His greed caused Achilles’ wrath.”

“Interesting then he’s the one who mentioned the reward to me. Not Menelaus.”

“A sure sign he intends to collect it. “

“Maybe. If he brings it up, he appears not be hiding anything. He’s got money troubles.”

“Very interesting. Would Menelaus allow it?”

“If Menelaus didn’t know…”

“Or it was advantageous not to know.”

A blanket of silence falls and Hannibal understands Will’s imagination is grinding out possible scenarios in his mind and finding none of them particularly positive. He listens to Will breathe, the sound drifts softly into his ears. Will clears his throat, his voice more quiet as he speaks.

“If…Patroclus should find himself surrounded by…wait a minute…fu…gotta go.”

Hannibal retreats into the shadow of the woods to stand beneath the canopy of green leaves. He waits long enough to see Will emerge from behind a small building, a shed perhaps, trailed by two Polizia officers, one man and one woman. He watches Will walk with them back to the main building where the slaughter pit is. Hannibal thinks they chose a most inopportune time to interrupt Will.

As he turns and walks deeper into the woods to retrieve his Ducati Hannibal supposes that talking to Will by phone is not going to satisfy him much longer. And in light of the illuminating discoveries revealed within their tableaux, Hannibal thinks Will feels the same.

Chapter End Notes

Coming up:
Jack picks Daniel’s brain. Du Maurier watches the news but will she spill her wine? And will Price ever get his ten bucks from Zeller?

Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

> Jack picks Daniel’s brain. Will has to deal with Alia. Jack and Will have a long overdue tête-à-tête that is ultimately unsatisfying. Du Maurier watches the news but will she spill her wine? Or throw it at Hannibal…
>
> “You’re right. I got too close. You said not to confuse what he wanted with what I wanted.” Will is saying, eyes almost peering into Jack’s face, but not quite.
>
> “Is that what happened?”
>
> “It’s why I’m in therapy, Jack.”
>
> “I am trying to wrap my head around this. Have been for a year. Where did things go wrong?”
>
> “Perspective. We lost our perspective. Didn’t want to consider the cost.”
>
> Jack closes his eyes for a brief moment, memoires of ice fishing and a shared cask of whiskey filling his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 63

Jack picks Daniel’s brain. Will has to deal with Alia. Jack and Will have a long overdue tête-à-tête that is ultimately unsatisfying. Du Maurier watches the news but will she spill her wine? Or throw it at Hannibal…

L'incantatrice di Serpenti o Reptilarium, Roberto Ferri

Daniel drains the last of his iced tea, an eye on Price and Zeller as the two of them finish up their lunches of pre-packaged sandwiches and large bags of American brand chips. Daniel suspects his empathy must have abetted his appetite. He has actually finished the moderately oiled roll filled with cured Italian meats and sharp Provolone cheese. He had selected a sandwich from the same tray as both of the Science Team's forensic investigators thinking he should at least try and eat something. Price and Zeller had attacked their lunches with undisguised gusto, unfazed by their surroundings.

Both Zeller and Price talk and chew at the same time. And the talk leaves caution to the wind. He wonders if Jack is aware of how much gossip goes on when he isn't around. Daniel is convinced the compulsive chinwagging is indicative of complacency, a complete lack of concern about job security.

Perhaps subconsciously drawing upon the friendliness extended to him, Daniel had been able to enjoy his lunch after a couple bites with a similar intestinal fortitude demonstrated by his companions. Quick smiles had given way to easy laughter, and soon the sight of Luciano's ghastly blood drained section of face had lost its power to rob Daniel of his appetite. Daniel hopes it is his empathy with Price and Zeller's feelings that has desensitized him and not his empathy with Will's.

Standing beside Will as he had cast out his line to hook Jack had been an education. The stagecraft and theatricality had not been limited to the artfully arranged abortion deposited on the ground before them. He rolls the sandwich wrapping between finger and thumb, a poor substitute for a cigarette, and thinks that Will was the work of art Jack should have been paying more attention to.

Will had played his role of pensive profiler flawlessly. With Crawford, Will manages to strike a delicate balance between aloofness and deference, and it had seemed effortless, natural, a task no more difficult than pulling on a worn old baseball glove.

Will's face had shifted as a landscape beneath the passing of clouds. From the puckering of pink lips to the lifting of beleaguered brows and a fluttering of eyelashes, Will had delivered for Jack a shimmer of the man he knew Jack wanted to remember. Daniel can only surmise that Jack's ensuing behaviors had been in line with what Will had expected.

What Daniel had felt coiled beneath the surface contrasted sharply with the doleful exterior. Will's awareness had been positively primal. The gaze of the pacing predator Daniel has seen many times had gleamed behind pale blue eyes no longer shrouded beneath a canopy of soft curls. The tousled mane has been tamed somewhat and Will's face had been in plain view the entire time. Daniel had seen every subtle movement as Will had adjusted his expressions, calibrated to counter every one of Crawford's. Jack had looked to Will quite a lot as they had pitched parsed words back and forth and Will had seemed not to notice, had averted his eyes as Daniel suspects he often used to, but Daniel knows not one gesture or expression from Jack had escaped his attention.

Perhaps affected by Will and experiencing something of the same predatory awareness within, Daniel ponders Will's behaviors with regard to him. The inkling that Will might be playing him every bit as much as he is playing Crawford will not be quieted no matter how much Daniel shakes his blanket of doubt.

Daniel had watched him adapt, evolve, and become right before his eyes, and Daniel does not wonder how Hannibal had been so completely taken with him. How he has been so completely taken with him.

Will's gift allows him to answer desire or prey upon it, an almost divine ability to discern unspoken prayers with a glance.

And yet, when Crawford had left them, Daniel had felt the Will he knows slowly returning, painfully alone and waiting upon Daniel's ocean to wash upon his sandy shore, for the quiet mist to envelop him once more. Will had stood close to him, blazers colliding in a soft crush of fabric, and Daniel had felt the need from Will, had felt the tension uncoil as Crawford had receded from them, a flurry of dry dust in his wake.

If he has issues he may or may not be aware of how they are affecting you…

Daniel wonders if the Will he feels is genuine or if he only thinks he knows Will because that is what Will wants him to think. Daniel shocks himself as the thought occurs to him that Will may not even be aware that he changes, like a chameleon is unaware of changing colors.

…but the traumatized are often unaware that they are damaged.

In this instance, I think he is aware.

I was not referring to him.

Daniel shakes the thoughts loose, lets them fall like dust from his blanket. Will's experience with Lecter has left him painfully aware of his mind and its inner mechanisms. Daniel tells himself that whatever Will does is deliberate, and that thought brings no comfort either.

He has not seen Will in quite a while but figures Jack or Pazzi are monopolizing his time and his imagination. Being unable to confer with Will privately gnaws at him, the annoyance constant. Each time he has attempted to guide Will aside to talk, someone approaches and Daniel has dropped his hand, immediately self-conscious.

He tells Price and Zeller he's going to get some air outside and offers to collect the trash they have all strewn across the ground. After tossing the refuse in the trash can outside, he scans the yard still full of very warm and perspiring bodies and begins to amble toward the cluster of FBI vehicles hoping to find Will there.

The narrative Will had concocted for Jack had been composed with Daniel's help. But even knowing Will as he does has not offered a clue as to the messages Will had included for Hannibal. Will has kept that narrative to himself. And whatever private messages Hannibal had sent him remain locked in his head to further infuse the dark hallucinations that Daniel knows stalk him even here.

Before they had left Fiesole for Florence this morning, Will had turned from the kitchen windows still smudged with oily fingerprints and dried flecks of red that resemble bits of tomato but Daniel knows are not, eyes lowered and focused more on the space between them rather than meet Daniel's gaze.

You know, Daniel, the hallucinations are worse since the hypnotherapy. Much more frequent now.

Well, you um…killed right after so it's…a little difficult to determine which is the cause, huh?

The memories and associations released with the drugs and therapy continue to slip into his waking life, compounded by the euphoria of killing, evidence that Will's subconscious continues to speak to him through his imagination. What Will sees is painted with the emotions he struggles to reconcile and he struggles whether his eyes are open or not. He sees whether dreaming or not.

Will had barely recovered from his drug induced hallucinations when the surreal had been thrust upon him again. What Will is seeing superimposed upon what is actually here Daniel can only guess. His ability to straddle both his realities and still function astounds.

"So, Will…" Jack's voice comes from behind as the sound of feet scratching dirt registers, "How much of that letter from Clayton is uh…factual and how much is bull…"

Daniel turns slowly to find Jack's mouth slack. Large brown eyes blink as they gaze into a sea of green, not blue.

"For fuck's sake…"

"At least as factual as the letter you accepted from Lecter, Agent Crawford."

Jack stares back dully, looks aside mouth drawn tight and because Daniel feels the fatigue and frustration festering in Will's erstwhile boss, he leaves the rest of his thoughts unspoken.

You put them together, Jack. You! They never would have met had it not been for you…

"Did you deliberately wear the same color suits today?" Jack snaps.

"*My* shirt is white…"

Despite the indulgent smile, Jack's irritation strikes Daniel like a slap. "Will had to borrow a suit, nearly all his clothes went up in the fire. I think I have very few in the color range and style he prefers."

Jack takes a breath and nods and the storm cloud passes. "About the letter…"

"What I wrote in that letter is true to the best of my knowledge so you can give it to your superiors in good faith. Nothing has changed since our conversation before. Will has been in therapy for generalized PSTD and related depression. There are no neurological or biological disorders. He had a CAT scan performed. He is as sane as he can be given what he has been through."

“Sanity is a relative term at best with Will.”

“Well, I suppose one could argue there is a certain clinical yardstick, but Will meets that. I can’t attest to what healthy or unhealthy looks like for him because I don’t know what “normal” is for him. I can tell you he is still cooperative and drug free.” Daniel says thinking that is mostly true.

Jack does not take issue with Clayton or his resume. Clayton has a sterling reputation. Jack reminds himself that so too did Hannibal. However, the probability of Will engaging the services of two unorthodox psychiatrists is too small as to be insignificant. Clayton is likeable enough, well-read obviously, and he seems to have a calming effect on Will. Jack has noticed that Will lingers within Clayton’s personal space whenever possible.

It is Will with whom he takes issue. He knows the generalized depression and PSTD labels are bullshit and so does Clayton. If Will voluntarily went to a psychiatrist, there must be a reason. Something is going on his head to convince him he needs help because Will has typically managed on his own. The familiarity between doctor and patient is none of Jack’s business, but the familiarity may be indicative of Lecter’s influence clinging to Will like smoke after the fire has gone out. Jack needs to know that the fire has indeed gone out.

“Will’s issues are specific and unique. What sort of *therapy* do you provide someone like Will?”

Jack speaks in a tone he knows Daniel will not appreciate, insinuation hanging in the air as thick as the humidity. He wants to gage Daniel’s composure under scrutiny outside the comfort of his home and from behind a lap top. Clayton may even open up without Will being present. If Clayton has concerns about his association with Will, now would be a good time to voice them.

“A combination of approaches, tailor made for him.” Daniel chooses his words carefully in response to the raised brows. He recognizes the provocative tactic for what it is. “Sometimes a patient’s needs require that I try alternative methods.”

When Jack’s face caves in mock confusion, Daniel clarifies. “The Canine therapy? It’s the keystone of my practice. Will…likes dogs, responds to them. Better than people.”

Something like a begrudging smile tugs at Jack’s mouth. He takes a breath and his face assumes the grim demeanor once again.

“Right. You have a couple dogs.”

Jack is getting into territory he knows he shouldn’t with questions he knows he shouldn’t ask. Daniel shifts his weight, looks past Jack into the middle distance at nothing in particular while he waits for the next volley.

“He gets along very well with you.”

“A patient should feel comfortable with his psychiatrist. Perhaps a first for Will.”

“Been a lot of firsts for Will I think.” Jack pauses, looks around, “You are very comfortable with each other.”

“Is that an observation or do I sense a question? If it is, be careful what you ask me.”

Clarifying Will’s relationship with Lecter would be within Jack’s purview, to a point. Seeking clarification about Will’s relationship with Daniel would not. Daniel’s presence at the crime scenes is highly questionable. Just like employing a profiler with potentially confused loyalties while employing the services of that profiler’s psychiatrist as another profiler on the same case is highly questionable. Jack must rationalize the obvious conflicts of interests here with an amazingly thick coating of denial. He did the same thing with Will and Hannibal.

If Jack has reservations about Will, and he does, then he should remove him from the case. But, he won’t. Jack is counting on those potentially confused loyalties to snare Lecter. Will is potential collateral damage, already damaged collateral from last time. That too, is a conflict of interest.

Daniel figures it would be consistent with Jack’s training to cover his bases particularly if Jack is unofficially feeling Daniel out for an alibi. Crawford is certainly doing his best to keep Daniel on his toes. Good thing Will had warned him and thrown a few hardball questions at him this morning.

Jack looks up from fiddling with the buttons on the cuff of his blazer, lips pucker and the breath of air he releases smacks Daniel with a fresh concentrated blast of anxiety. Tension has been whirring around him all day, and Jack’s insistence on standing so close isn’t helping. He braces himself, freezing his expression as Jack‘s next question squirms out of his mouth.

“Why the change in…sexual orientation?” The question fairly bursts out of Jack’s mouth as though shot from a cannon.

The club Jack wields is jarring in its bluntness. Daniel throws up his mental shock absorbers as best he can. The source of Crawford’s agitation is abundantly clear. He has been unable to shove the forensic reports of Lecter’s house from his mind.

“Agent Crawford…”

“Look, I have to ask somebody…”

“Not me…”

Daniel sighs, knows he has to offer Jack something or Jack will infer obstinacy even though as Will’s psychiatrist he doesn’t have to give Jack anything. But, Will has to work with him and Daniel figures that if he has the opportunity to shape Jack’s opinion of Will more positively, and relieve the anxiety before it distills into something far less manageable, he should jump on it.

“Orientation is such a…dated word. You are assuming you even know what his orientation is, but…I would challenge the assumption by saying his orientation is not so much changed as expanded. By his empathy. I can’t discuss Will with you outside the contents of the letter. You know that.”

“Fine. Then we’ll discuss Hannibal.”

“And by extension, Will.”

“If your understanding of his empathy applies, then…”

Daniel turns away from Jack. Jack edges closer, not with his feet but with his body, leaning into Daniel’s space, hovering just above his head, utilizing the height difference between them to what he believes is his advantage. Daniel understands what Will deals with all the time.

“What is Hannibal’s…orientation?” Jack angles his head to one side.

Jack knows Hannibal was sleeping with Alana Bloom and Will. Jack’s question is not based in puerile curiosity, either. Jack is trying to understand the mind game going on between Hannibal and Will. Will got into Lecter’s head and allowed Lecter into his. Ergo…

“I wouldn’t characterize his…behavior as orientation. He is…among many other less benign things a sensualist and an opportunist. His pathology goes beyond such simplistic labels. Take food for example. The selection…”

Jack opens his mouth to speak, grunts instead. Daniel‘s tongue slides over and over his teeth. He wants a cigarette so badly. He slowly cracks a knuckle at a time with his thumb.

“…the selection, preparation, and the actual eating are all parts of a stimulating experience, physically and emotionally satisfying. All the senses are involved.”

“He eats people.”

“Yes, he does and he enjoys it. Control. Narcissism. Dominance… Sex is like food. All the senses engaged. Engaged and linked to the pathology. Intensely gratifying and powerfully…addictive, especially when the other person can become what you want.”

Daniel meets the penetrating gaze, breathes again when Jack nods, brown eyes shifting to consider the array of vehicles parked along the rickety fence. Decidedly less than tasty thoughts raging in his head.

“And this epic universe he lives in… Where does Will fit in?”

“You mean before or after he gutted him?”

“You think Will doesn’t fit anymore.”

“I think…Hannibal has learned from his mistakes and won’t repeat them.” Daniel says, as Jack’s dark eyes spark, like embers there and gone.

Jack scratches at the finely trimmed whiskers under his chin, “So, whatever there had been between them before is changed, if not destroyed. Did Will discuss with you what words, if any were exchanged between them, that night in the kitchen?”

“I can’t talk about that.”

“No…but you did just answer my question.”

“Did I?” Daniel looks aside as though contemplating whether or not to say more, “Memory is a funny thing as you well know. Witnesses to a traumatic event, especially participants, will have gaps because things happen too quickly for the mind to process at the time. Later, their emotions, their perceptions conflict with what they remember and what they want to remember. They fill in the gaps with what they want to believe happened. Will is no different. But he wants to remember accurately.”

“I guess I can’t ask you if you’ve helped him recover his memories of that night.”

Daniel knows Jack is referring to Will's insistence he doesn't remember all of it. What Will told him does not matter because Daniel wants to spin Jack in another direction.

"Agent Crawford, I have spent considerable time helping Will reconstruct a past that, for some of the time, he spent as someone else. For you."

The folds of Jack's eyelids tic slightly, his lips twist to one side, discomfiture apparent in the scrape of his shoes against the gravel beneath.

"Do you concur with Will's interpretations of the crime tableaux?" He says after an uncomfortable silence.

"I put my two cents in. I think he did the best he could without much forensic evidence to go on. His ideas might change. That would be consistent with how it usually works, right?"

Jack nods, "Yeah, as evidence becomes available his perceptions adjust to the new information to either support what he thinks or help him make those leaps of imagination he is capable of."

Daniel hears and feels the admiration from Jack swirling as it does with the less magnanimous emotions Jack is feeling right now. Daniel receives the distinct impression Jack is holding back a lot, though about what Daniel has no idea. But the feeling persists, like a rudder slicing through a choppy sea, hard to follow but there nonetheless.

"Well," Daniel says, "I agree both the tableaux introduce an excess of information, overwhelming on purpose to distract. Hannibal knew, knows you would bring Will to the crime scenes. He knows how Will's mind works. I wouldn't put it past him to um…mess with his imagination a little, or a lot."

"I think Doctor Lecter is giving us a run around, too."

"The killer has a face this time. You don't need Will to identify the killer, you sent him here to lure Lecter, again. See if you can throw out the tasty bait one more time before you toss it aside."

"Did Will say that?"

"No. I'm saying it. He's my patient, Agent Crawford and he's more than that. He's my friend, and he doesn't have many."

"I know. I let him get too close."

"You keep saying that. Does it make you feel better?

Jack's' eyes narrow as he looks at Daniel. "He wanted to come, wanted closure he said."

"What kind of closure do you think he's likely to get? What kind of friend are you?"

Du Maurier slams the car door shut with a well-aimed hip jostling the poorly packed brown bag of groceries in her arms; the items shift as she huffs along the pavement in cushioned gym shoes that barely absorb the tremors running up her spine. Tremors that have not stopped since the cashier had frowned at the pack of boneless pork chops on the check-out counter and related the rumors of the human and pig remains found in front of *Il Porcellino* this morning. The cruel curve of Du Maurier's lips had unnerved the poor girl to silence.

She leaves her sable colored Mercedes in the drive. This she does out of haste. Usually, the vehicle would be sheltered in the garage immediately and she would walk the groceries through the back. But, this afternoon is not the usual by far. Murder is afoot in Florence and Hannibal has made the news.

She winds her way through the villa to the kitchen, sets the swollen bag on the counter and immediately opens the fridge in search of solace. She finds it on the bottom shelf lying on its side. With palms still moist from gripping the black leather steering wheel, she pours a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc and takes a cleansing breath before bringing the glass to her lips.

Glass in hand, she walks briskly into the living room directly to the cut glass coffee table, reaches past the assortment of books and magazines that obscure the object she seeks. Curling her fingers around the remote, she aims it at the flat screen tv mounted on the far wall and begins to click.

Her heart constricts in her chest as her fears are confirmed. No matter what local channel pops up on the screen the story is the same. *Hannibal….*

She listens to the news anchor as weariness and wine whirl around her head. She cannot play the game of chess she wants with Hannibal now that he has shaken the board so furiously, so… permanently. So deliberately.

Whoever these…victims were, Hannibal could have dispatched them with the customary restraint he has employed since their arrival in Florence. The only reason Du Maurier can imagine him breaking from his pattern of discretion is Graham. Hannibal has erected a veritable billboard. He could have done this anytime in the past year, but he chooses now.

Hannibal has also chosen to surprise her. As she watches the news it becomes clear that the murder tableaux he has unveiled for the Florentines surpass any he had left back home. He either knows Graham is here, or has tired of searching for him through conventional and legal channels. Du Maurier thinks the former.

Sure enough, Graham's unmistakable visage appears, in profile and off to the side of an FBI van, but in plain view. The image was only on screen for a second or two before the camera panned elsewhere. This likely means Jack Crawford is in Florence. Graham would not have been permitted to enter the crime scene without Crawford.

The murder tableaux must be horrific. One of them, a woman, was evidently posed as a functioning fountain directly in front of the famous landmark it parodies. Du Maurier has to admire the ingenuity and the brazenness required to display the carnage in such a public place as the Mercato Nuovo. On a Sunday morning.

The other murder tableau, composed of individually wrapped body parts in a fish tank, was found in an abandoned slaughter house, several miles away outside of the city. Du Maurier muses as to how Hannibal might have accomplished the feat of arranging two tableaux in the same day.

Monstrosities of this magnitude take time. Hannibal must have been designing them, if not constructing them when he had called about dinner. She swallows slowly thinking he had likely been hip deep in one of them while he had been talking to her. Or flipping through recipes. Hannibal's flair for the theatrical is in full force, showing off for his beloved Graham.

The appearance of the tableaux just had to be timed with the much anticipated transfer of assets. He has used her yet again. Her mind reels as she thinks of the months of planning, of enduring the melancholy, the sullen silences, the interminable drawings…and now this. The rage swells like a tide as her fingers clench the stem of the wine glass. The slender stem snaps between her fingers and Du Maurier stares at crimson stained fingers as crystal shatters at her feet. She does not even feel the embedded shards protruding from flesh like glittering thorns.

She is shaken from her stupor by the ringing of her phone. She grabs a handful of paper towels to wrap her hand and picks up the phone. It's a text message…from Levin at Banque Suisse.

Awaited transfer complete. Code to follow.

Du Maurier stares at the smiling emoticon after the message and giggles erupt as she looks first at the blood soaked paper wrapped around her hand, then the tv. Madness blooms in Florence. What is Hannibal up to?

She muses that while it is possible that Graham has finally pierced the great Achilles' heel and pushed Hannibal over the edge, a conversation with Jack Crawford has become a necessity. She must have more information on the victims and Graham, aside from what Hannibal will tell her. And, thanks to Hannibal's compulsions, without Crawford's cooperation, she will never get out of the country undetected. Hannibal has provided her with his code, but he has trapped her in Florence. With him. Again.

Du Maurier begins to collect the shattered pieces of crystal from the hardwood floor. As she does she collects her thoughts also. Before she can approach Jack Crawford she needs more insight. She will have to speak with Hannibal first. Hannibal may have become completely unraveled and he is therefore, unpredictable in his dangerousness. Precautions must be taken and prudence must accompany her every action, every word.

As she leans over the sink to pluck the shards of crystal from her palm, she looks to the pretty curio cabinet in the hall admiring its antique finish gleaming in the sunlight. When she has seen to her wounds, she will load a fresh clip into the Glock she keeps beneath the layers of silk table cloths and remove the safety. Her eyes wander back to the phone by the sink. Where is he?

"Will."

Alia's hand tugs at his sleeve, draws him to her as she halts in the yard, allowing Ruggerio to walk ahead.

"Over here."

She nods toward a couple of Polizia sedans parked by the fence and starts in that direction. Ruggerio turns around, notices the two of them are headed toward the cars, reaches in his pocket for his cigarettes and offers Alia a heads up. He walks to stand in front of the building housing the slaughter pit. He lights his cigarette and leans against the wall, waiting for his partner, but giving her the space she wants with Will.

She nods back, flips her finger off her nose at him and returns her gaze to Will, mouth caught between smile and apology. Will looks down as she squeezes his arm, a gentle if not meaningful contraction of fingers in search of reassurance Will doubts he can offer her. She wants reassurance about way too many things.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“Yes.”

“You think I can’t be discreet?”

“Too late for that.” Will says as Pazzi enters his peripheral vision, his lean bearded figure skirts the perimeter of the slaughter house. “Did Pazzi tell you to talk to me?”

“No!”

“He’s right over there.” Will nods towards the fence behind her.

“*Merda*.” She mutters softy. The curse is followed by several epithets surprisingly filthy coming from the pretty pink lips speaking them.

“He’s such a pig.” Alia says and catches herself as Will pulls on his lower lip, gaze momentarily drawn to the slaughter house.

“Yes, he is.” Will agrees.

“Pazzi showed me the photos of Tier.” She pauses, but Will merely looks at her, face blank like an empty page. “He thinks Lucia was made in homage to you, the symbolism of the heart…satanically romantic.”

“That’s one interpretation.”

“And he thinks that this one…may not be his. Could be the work of a friend. He doesn’t say it, but he suspects you, Will. He wants a timeline really bad.”

“We all want a timeline. That may not be possible.”

“Convenient, no?”

Will’s fingers find Alia’s still hooked around the sleeve of his blazer, he squeezes once. “Not convenient at all. By design.”

Alia’s eyes widen. She thinks she is hearing what Will is saying, but she is not quite sure. He seems to be telling her that all this is somehow part of his plan to catch Lecter.

“Huh. There’s messages for Verger but all that other stuff? This Lecter is throwing the kitchen sink at us. His friend…too?”

Will nods. “Sorting through all of it takes time. That’s the intention. Distortion of the truth.”

“Do you think maybe his friend…distorts a different truth?”

“Anything is possible.”

“You know the Paolini are looking for both of you. Mason and the family do not care about any truth.”

“Truth becomes irrelevant if it gets in the way of we want sometimes.”

Alia purses her lips, looks away. “This is a mess. They will kill you if they get to you. What if they go to Daniel’s house?”

“I think they will try something less drastic. Jack knows what is going on. There will be protection posted around Daniel’s house.”

“FBI? Or, Polizia?”

“FBI resources are limited here. Probably, Polizia.”

The thought occurs to Will Alia would leap at the chance. He doubts Pazzi would give her that detail. He also does not believe it beneath Pazzi to use Alia, either. Will shrugs, sighs, exasperated and tired.

“Maybe you should move out.” Alia counters.

“I have a weapon. I used to be a cop. Daniel’s not the target.”

“He’s a way to get to you.”

“All the more reason to stay. I can keep an eye on him.”

“You said you are one of the bad guys, but you are a bad guy trying to catch the bad guy again?”

“That…is my assignment.”

Alia’s nose wrinkles with the non-answer. She frowns as she looks stubbornly up into his face, and Will shoves images of bouncing on Daniel’s couch with her away. Not easily, but he tries.

“What is going on, Will? What are you really doing here?” Alia says, deciding she does not care for the cloak and dagger approach Will seems to prefer.

“What do you think I’m doing here?”

Alia’s eyes search his and Will sees accusation and hurt tumbling around. It is like looking into Alana’s face all over again. He wants to look away, but he doesn’t. He reminds himself this is necessary.

“I think that’s maybe a really bad answer to give a cop. It’s a lousy answer to give someone you’ve slept with. What do you expect me to do?” She snaps, frustrated clear down to her daintily painted toes.

The pale blue eyes staring into hers make her dizzy. She is being a horrible cop right now. Why does he have to be so sweet? Pazzi is going to grill her and then roast her alive.

“Your job.” Will says and he means it. “It has to be this way. Investigate me if you believe you have cause. You have to be free to do what feels right to you. If you let me, I’ll compromise everything for you. You have to look out for yourself.”

"What about you?" She looks up at him with her huge brown eyes, much softer now than they were a moment ago.

"Oh, I can take care of me. I've done a bang up job so far…"

"Is there anything I can do to help?" The touch of her fingers along his sleeve tug at him inside as well. He hangs his head as he contemplates dragging her further into this web he weaves.

"Without…compromising myself?" She adds quickly.

"Actually there is. Can you get me into the Uffizi?"

"The Uffizi? Why not just take a tour?"

"Because you have a badge. I need to look around. And Daniel, too."

"Daniel? What do you need him for?"

"Because he looks like me."

Stunned, but obviously curious, Alia tears her face away from Will's to look at her feet. She wriggles her toes inside her sandals as she thinks, and if Will did not know better would believe she was being cute on purpose. He lifts his head to search for Pazzi along the fence, but he has moved and Will cannot locate him.

"I'll get you into the Uffizi, Will. But this friend of Lecter's…? Tell him he needs more therapy. He has very little time to get better." She edges closer, close enough to sniff along his collar, standing on tiptoe to do so. "Hmmm. Why do you have to smell so good today, eh?"

And Will?

Yes…Hannibal?

I am pleased you wear the same cologne. I like it on you. I would know it anywhere.

Alia releases his arm and turns to traipse back to the slaughter house to join her partner. Will follows her, the fragrance of his cologne teasing his nostrils and his memory.

"I'm going to cut you and Doctor Clayton loose soon. We're about done here. I have to oversee the temporary base of operations back in Florence. You don't have to be there for that, but I'll give you the address so you can come in tomorrow morning."

Jack sits on the back bumper of the FBI van out of the sun while Zeller and Price secure the evidence for the ride. Daniel paces beside the van, weary and wired, but attentive and exchanging glances with Will as Jack continues to speak.

"I guess you need to let the dogs out, huh?" Jack turns to Daniel.

"Uh…yeah. A long time to hold it. They'll be hungry, too."

"You comfortable staying there, Will? Or maybe I should ask if Doctor Clayton is…"

“We’ve discussed it.” Daniel says, “For now things can stay as they are unless something happens that causes us to reconsider.”

“Without knowing Lecter’s intentions, I’m not comfortable leaving your property unguarded.”

“I don’t think it’s Hannibal we have to worry about.” Will says.

“You’re referring to the Paolini.”

Are we? Will nods and waits for Jack to continue, hands brushing at the invisible feathers at his neck. The serpent tailed creature squats in the field on the other side of the fence, its red rimmed eyes tracking his every movement. Will shifts his gaze, watches Daniel’s feet scuff the dirt, making a trail beside the van instead.

“I have some more evidence to share, but before I do, I want to talk to Will in private. So…clear out.”

Jack has plenty to talk about and plenty he wants to keep to himself, for now. The matter of one very anonymous and very large reward for Hannibal posted on the internet two hours ago is one of them. Jack has people working on taking it down, but that may take a while. While it is up Jack thinks he may be able to capitalize on it. How he might make a silk purse out of sow’s ear depends on who, if any, of the law enforcement on the case try to take the anonymous Mason Verger up on his offer.

Daniel nods towards Alia and Ruggerio in the distance while Price and Zeller clamor out the back and file past Jack, each of them tossing an apologetic look in Will’s direction.

“You said you wanted closure.” Jack says once they are alone.

“I do.”

“What do you mean by that, exactly?”

“Like closing the last chapter of a book, Jack. Not an endless string of sequels.”

Jack picks up on the annoyance from Will, as though his vague metaphor were an answer. He reminds himself Will communicates in metaphor frequently; he just hasn’t been around him in a while. Jack scratches along his throat; between the whiskers and the sweat he is going to rub himself raw.

“I let you get too close before and I know how tired that sounds. But I can’t let you near him, alone this time, Will. I don’t know what could happen.”

“To me, or to him?”

“C’mon. I’m under the gun here. Do you even trust yourself? You know what happens to you if he gets away again. Purnell will have a field day…with both of us. Your only shot at redemption is to help me.”

Will’s pale blue eyes flicker, a subtle but disarming gleam as Jack considers the Will who stands before him now. Will has been a rather disarming presence all day, almost the young man he ambushed in his classroom, but not quite. Jack supposes he will never see that young man again.

Jack wants to appeal to Will's empathy. He knows Will invariably empathizes with him; he can't help it, according to Lecter. He looks up at the young man he once called friend, and would again, except that Will betrayed him. He knows that to a degree, Chilton had been correct about Will. His behaviors are all an act. Jack understands Will throws up walls of avoidance and pretends to various neuroses as a buffer. But he can consciously and unconsciously assume anyone's perspective, anytime, and this makes him dangerous. And vulnerable…to Hannibal's influence.

The problem Will has is too many mirror neurons. Our heads are filled with them when we are children supposed to help us socialize and then melt away. But Will held on to his, which makes knowing who he is a challenge. When you take him to a crime scene, Jack, the very air has screams smeared on it.

Lecter had been manipulating Jack, influencing his perspective of Will at the time for his own purposes, but Jack suspects the observation was accurate. He has since seen the proof in Will's actions and behavior. And as far as the current murder tableaux go, Will's interpretations echo similar comments from the past, comments related to him from his science team, Beverly in particular. In the Silvestri case, Hannibal had used the organ harvester to try and confuse Will, but Will had seen through it. They had caught the organ harvester, but not the Ripper.

Every brutal choice has elegance, grace. His mutilations hide the true nature of his crimes.

Hannibal had done it again when he had wanted to disguise his interference with the work of the Muralist, James Gray. Hannibal had murdered the serial killer and had sewn him into his own human mural. Beverly and Will had pieced it together, stitch by stitch.

So, this second killer, whoever he is, understood the Muralist well enough not just to find his canvas, but well enough to convince him - to be part of it.

Jack sighs with thoughts of Beverly. Not a day goes by that he does not miss her presence. He sure could use her insight now. Jack thinks there is a lot about these two tableaux that remind him of cases with Beverly and he thinks maybe that is not incidental. It seems to Jack that the murders of Lucia and Luciano are a variation on this same theme. The question remains, why would Hannibal choose to resurrect this particular theme? What is he disguising this time?

No one has torn Jack up inside more than Will. He has lost people before, had beat himself up over Miriam Lass, but he had not had to watch her disintegration happen right in front of him, week after agonizing week. Will has seen and felt too much and though Jack is saddened by this, enough that his heart still wrenches sometimes when he looks at Will, he cannot let his feelings get in the way of bringing Hannibal in.

He just can't. His reason for talking to Will alone is entirely about catching Hannibal. He needs to know Will's mind, at least as much he can. Will is more likely to speak honestly in private without the Polizia, without the forensic team, and without his psychiatrist hovering around.

"You're right. I got too close. You said not to confuse what he wanted with what I wanted." Will is saying, eyes almost peering into Jack's face, but not quite.

"Is that what happened?"

"It's why I'm in therapy, Jack."

"I am trying to wrap my head around this. Have been for a year. Where did things go wrong?"

“Perspective. We lost our perspective. Didn’t want to consider the cost.”

Jack closes his eyes for a brief moment, memoires of ice fishing and a shared flask of whiskey filling his head.

You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist. Your lure is the one thing he wants, despite everything he knows.

Make a wrong move, he swims away?

Yeah. I'm a good fisherman, Jack.

You hook him, I'll land him.

Jack had sat with Will out on the ice that afternoon, completely convinced they could pull it off. He had convinced himself Will could be that one lure that Hannibal with all his narcissism could not resist, a foe who had survived his manipulation once and whose very existence taunted him. Will had not overestimated his allure. That much is clear. He had perhaps underestimated Hannibal’s powers of persuasion. Jack is forced to consider that Will might have had his own agenda with Hannibal all along.

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, agent Crawford.

Will's not alone.

No, he's not.

Jack thinks Will has not been alone since he introduced him to Hannibal. Hannibal had taken to him right away. Jack figures that is an awfully long time to be in someone’s head. Hannibal had manipulated Miriam Lass with drugs and intensive therapy performed in isolation, tantamount to brainwashing. He had stripped her of all sense of self. With Will, Hannibal had used his own empathy against him, in half the amount of time. Jack has to indeed wonder who was chasing whom.

Because Jack does not know Will’s true intentions leading to that night Baltimore, he cannot trust him now and he wishes he could. He does know that Will had been conflicted. Too conflicted to use his gun. The nature of his relationship with Hannibal forever a mystery, perhaps even to Will.

There are however two realities that are not a mystery to Jack. Will is a killer. And he is unpredictable.

“You took it too far. You were just supposed to hook him.”

“I did. And you were supposed to land him. Lost perspective, Jack.”

“We both tried. And he still got away. He wasn’t hungry last time and you made him bite anyway. It will be harder to catch him this time.”

“He bit. You want to change the bait?”

“Let’s talk about that. Are you trying to recreate another reality where only you and the fish exist?”

Will nods and looks briefly at Jack before dropping his gaze to the ground once more. That particular reality already exists. Jack is perhaps vaguely aware that such a reality could exist, but Jack is a linear thinker, and he will pretend to allow Will to recreate a new reality with Hannibal under his jurisdiction and believe he is in control. This is Will's design.

Jack does not put it past Will to repeat a Randall Tier, but if Will did, Jack cannot imagine *how* he did it. Worse, it would mean contact with Hannibal already. He cannot bring himself to believe Clayton would have anything to do with it. Will would at least keep him out of it and confidentiality does not extend to conspiracy. Clayton is…wholesome, like Will used to be. And there is one glaring piece of evidence linking both murders to Hannibal.

Hannibal grabbed both twins at the airport. There is no evidence pointing to Will for that. Neither of the tableaux conclusively point to one or the other except in the context of previous murders. The tableaux share a familiar pattern; they have all the right ingredients; they are similar. Horrific and beautiful in their complexity. But, absent evidence compelling enough for a warrant, Jack's hands are tied. Will knows this. All Jack can do is…his job. And allow Will the latitude to snare Lecter, and himself if that is what has to happen.

Will has kept things from him, the situation with Verger comes to mind, and he has exhibited a tendency toward indecisiveness, but he has not, to Jack's knowledge, ever outright lied to him. He can be evasive and stubborn, but when asked a direct question, he is truthful. It has been for this reason that Jack remains careful about what he asks him. Sometimes, Jack thinks he really does not want to know.

But that was the old Will.

"The last time, he got a taste of something he hadn't tasted before. And he didn't let go until he absolutely had to. The taste…is still in his mouth." Will says.

"Not your best metaphor, Will. He took all the other organs, left her heart with her eyes inside. Both of the tableaux point to previous murders, that involved you personally."

"Bev and Tier. He wanted me to blame myself for Beverly, but he killed her. You already know about Brown. He sent Tier to kill me, forced me to kill him."

"And Mason…?"

"More of our little game of trying to kill each other or induce the other to kill someone. I tried to make that work. The best intentions…"

Jack listens with clenched teeth. Two psychopaths playing chicken. And with his blessing. Part of him wants Will to shut up; the other part is admittedly fascinated. He reminds himself Will could only be sharing the tip of the iceberg with him. Will is insane. Functionally insane.

"But…Will… The evidence at Lecter's house suggested you did quite the opposite of wanting to kill each other."

Jack's eyes roll up and down and over Will. Jack does not want to know how Will rationalized climbing in bed with the serial killing cannibal, no matter how…charming he was. Jack has awakened from nightmares of Hannibal eating him, serving up plates of Jack Crawford at a crowded dinner table as he somehow watched. The worst was Hannibal serving Jack a plate of himself as Jack had sat without his left arm, munching meat, with truffles or something or other.

That dream had come on the heels of finding Miriam. Jack has had enough nightmares from dining at Hannibal's home, has had his share of vomiting over the toilet...

Will lives his nightmares and Jack feels the responsibility he bears for that in his gut every day. He takes medication for it. He cannot erase the past, but he can make damn sure all the suffering has not been in vain.

Will presents as a very attractive young man at the moment. He no longer hides his physical assets behind thick glass frames, plaid shirts, and nondescript attire. The aversion to social interaction remains. The attitude remains, but he does not channel autism like he used to. Fashion and attitude aside, Jack can appreciate Hannibal's admiration of him and if he really pushes his imagination to its limits, he can even understand the desire to possess him, control him. Will is visually quite stunning for a man, but those eyes and that face are instruments of manipulation, and Will is fully aware when he uses them.

Will accepts the appraising looks from Jack. He knows Jack doesn't like looking at him as a sexual being, engaged in intimate acts, and certainly not with Hannibal. Will does not like entertaining intimate images of Jack, either, though their conversations of Bella had summoned them anyway.

Jack is astute. Leaving the hearts in both tableaux was symbolic of many things. The placement of the hearts speaks to specific memories and conversations not meant for anyone else. Jack already suspects.

Hannibal had known as Will had known how the hearts might be interpreted apart from the intended misdirection. Will had known Hannibal would want to see sentimentality, if not outright romance from him. And Will understands that the narcissist in Hannibal could not resist seeing it.

But Hannibal does not have to deal with Jack. Placing those eyes in Lucia's heart is an invitation to honestly look to his emotions and accept them; but Hannibal is also forcing him to look with an audience, to further alienate him. He continues to foster the co-dependency he always has. And rather effectively if Will's conversation with Jack is any indication.

"You were trying to kill each other the entire time?" Jack asks, incredulous.

"Not the entire time, no. The prospect of killing is…like an appetizer, foreplay…"

"You used everything you had to get to him, didn't you." Jack speaks softly from the bumper that sags under his weight. "I noticed you changed your appearance, your clothes, even your aftershave. I saw it and dismissed it."

"You were supposed to…not look too closely. Plausible deniability."

"Christ, Will. But he was sleeping with Alana, too. An orchestrated alibi for Gideon?"

"I think that was fortuitous. Hardly something he could have managed without her cooperation. Could have drugged her. Not that he isn't capable of…seduction. He had a certain fondness for her."

"We all did. So did you if I recall. Romantic overtures." Jack says quietly.

"Don't think that Hannibal didn't enjoy that." Will says as memories flicker, quickly extinguished.

“So he used her. To get to you.”

“I was always aware of how easily Hannibal could manipulate me by threatening her if he wanted to, but strangely he didn’t go there much. He genuinely respected her enough to keep her out of it.”

“She didn’t know about you?”

“I don’t believe so. Hannibal seemed satisfied to rub only my nose in it.”

“Huh…Her DNA was all over the bedroom, just like yours.”

“Yes, Jack. He did us both, sometimes in the same week.”

Jack blinks at the crisply spoken candor. Will decides if Jack wants to go down this road, he will make it as bumpy as possible.

“While we’re on the subject of DNA, maybe you could answer another question that’s been nagging at me.”

“About…”

“Hannibal’s basement workshop under his kitchen. Very clean, very tidy, but not sterile. I guess he didn’t plan on it being found.”

Jack looks to Will. Will blinks his eyes and waits for Jack to continue. Jack gets to ask one question.

Jack clears his throat, “We found traces of several victims’ DNA, Beverly’s included, even though we also found…some of her where we found Miriam, and we found yours in the basement, too.”

“What’s the question?”

“Well, you were locked up when Beverly was murdered, and as far as the lab could tell, Tier’s DNA was the only sample that that aligned with the appearance of yours, time wise. Since you’ve already admitted to killing Tier, why is that?”

“You didn’t think I hacked up Tier at *my* house, did you?” Will says.

“You killed him at your house. Had his suit and…body parts in your freezer in the barn. Lounds saw it…”

“I shared the experience, and the DNA, with Hannibal. He was…quite pleased.”

Jack waves a hand in the air. “I get the picture.”

Will hopes so. Jack will lap up little tidbits like this, sprinkles on a sundae. He will infer that Will does not dismember bodies in his own house, or Daniel’s.

“Why do you think he is putting all this intimate knowledge of you in the tableaux? What’s his end game?” Jack asks.

“He has it in for Mason, but that’s obvious and to be truthful, I would look the other way at that one.”

Will ignores the eye roll from Jack. "Look, Jack… I got into Hobbs' head and Hannibal exploited that. I got into Hannibal's head and he exploited that, too. I think he's trying to exploit my empathy again, knowing you are relying on it to a degree. Recalling past associations is like…exposing the chinks in my armor."

"He wants to use you to fuck with the investigation. He knows we will use you like a road map, and he can extrapolate what we might do next. That's a very good strategy. And you couldn't tell me that in front of everyone else. I understand." Jack says, nodding at nothing.

Jack is feeling a little more generous toward Will in light of their discussion. Nothing Will has said contradicts anything Jack already knows and it aligns with what he hopes is going on. Unfortunately, Will would know this, and Jack can't be certain that what he hopes or thinks is going on, isn't exactly what Will wants him to think. Will is…really infuriating.

"Are you still trying to separate your feelings from Hannibal's?"

"Every day, Jack."

"It's why you are in therapy, I know." Jack slaps his hands on his sizable thighs and stands up. "Let's call the troops back so I can fill you in and let you go. Keep the badges. You'll need them to pass security at headquarters tomorrow. And leave your weapon at home. I know you have at least one."

"Can I ask why?"

"You are still separating your feelings. And…there are the rules of engagement. No one will fire on you if you don't have one aimed at them."

"Including you?"

"Especially me. I don't want to ever aim a gun at you again, Will."

Jack rubs dirt out of his eyes as tires spin from the vehicles pulling out of the slaughter house yards. Even the journalists have gone.

"I will have conclusive results of what I'm about to disclose tomorrow, won't I?"

Jack looks to Price and Zeller who nod enthusiastically at Jack, and each other. Price holds out his hand to Zeller, palm up, rubs his fingers together. Zeller reaches into the front pocket of his jeans, pulls out his wallet and slaps a crisp US ten dollar bill onto Price's outstretched hand.

"Thanks, sport. Your reputation as a non-squelcher remains." Price says.

"I bow to the master." Zeller says pointing to something on Price's tie.

Daniel watches in mild curiosity as Price inclines his head to have a look, Zeller clips him on the nose. Price shoves the bill in his pocket, huffing as he does. Daniel grins and decides that Price and Zeller had definitely provided a couple bright spots in an otherwise very dim day.

Will's skin feels sticky and close beneath the suit he wears. He has not worn a suit in a while and now remembers why he doesn't. He feels constricted, bound to the specific behaviors society expects from the attire. He wants out of this suit as badly as he wants to escape from these people. He looks out to the fields beyond the fence where the black birds of his imagination, ravens he realizes, continue to cluster. He wonders why ravens…

Daniel stands beside Will and Jack is struck again by the physical similarity. Jack catches himself imagining what their initial meeting must have been like, to practically look in a mirror for a second.

“In an effort to construct a timeline and to figure if we are dealing with one or maybe two killers, we have two avenues to explore. Because the sister was hooked up to the existing fountain, we are trying to use the change in water pressure to determine the time that the tableau became functional. We can compare that to the other tableau based on the batteries in the radio. Assuming the batteries were fresh at the time they were placed in the radio, we can figure how long the tableau sat there by the degradation, counting backward from the time of discovery. Hopefully, we’ll have something more to go on time wise.”

“No word yet on possible time or cause of death?” Will asks.

“Too much has been done to the bodies to even wager a guess here. It’s back to the lab for that. We still have to account for what is missing and what was put in the tableaux. We’ll be looking for drugs in the system, too. Might give as idea of the cause of death, at least if there was a struggle or not.”

Jack pauses to assess reactions all around. Jack sniffs at the impassivity and continues.

“Now here’s something to consider before I dismiss everyone and we only just found this and there may be more to come but inside the remains of Lucia’s chest cavity we found a…bouquet I guess you could call it of goose feathers and blonde hair. We also found a couple strands of blonde hair entwined in Lucia’s hair. The contrast in color made them hard to miss.”

Jack passes around a photo of the clump of feathers and hair to everyone. He waits while they all scrutinize the photo in their hands, paying special attention to Will’s reaction. The pale blue eyes reveal nothing as Will looks up from the enlarged glossy.

“Thoughts?” Jack prompts.

“A bouquet may not be accurate, Jack. I’m thinking garnish.”

“What makes you think that?”

“You found it the chest cavity, tucked under the ribs?”

“Yeah.”

“It was placed where the groceries were taken from. See how it’s tied up? Just like sprigs of herbs you throw in to season stock, a bouquet garni I think you call it. French cooking.”

“The significance?”

“Well, the significance of the garni might be straightforward enough. You remove it when the stock is done cooking. You don’t serve the stock or the dish with the garni. Whether or not that suggests the killer is finished, I don’t know.”

“And the feathers? Any classical allusions with that?” Jack looks to Daniel.

“I’m going to have to give that some thought. Geese do not figure in the myths we established already, at least nothing springs to mind.” Daniel says.

“Will?”

“I’m not feeling any inspiration either, Jack. But it’s been a long day…”

“I agree fresh eyes on this tomorrow sounds like a good idea. What about the blonde hair? Any thoughts on that?”

Jack is most certainly holding back Daniel decides. If he had to name the emotions swirling within Jack he thinks Jack is feeling trepidation, a lot of it. Daniel thinks Jack often holds back, to see what floats, but he will have to talk to Will later, get his thoughts on Jack.

“Mason is blonde. What’s the length of the hair?” Will asks, stating the obvious if just to get it out of the way.

“Varying lengths. No follicles. And here’s the kicker…more blonde hair in the dirt at this crime scene.”

“Same source?”

“Inconclusive, but we are running it.”

“It’s clearly planted evidence.” Price says, “but it’s the why that is perplexing.”

“Yes it is.” Will says, brows furrowed in thought.

Hannibal has thrown in a bonus message, the other reason he wanted to know the location of Will’s tableau. Hannibal has connected the two tableaux, possibly to suggest one killer…himself. Will thinks Hannibal may be leading the investigation away from him, but he’s not certain. He needs time to think - away from the barrage of extraneous clutter assaulting his mind.

His gaze shifts again to the flock of ravens on the other side of the fence, drawn to the flutter of movement as the ground opens up, belching smoke and ash into the darkening sky above. Will watches, eyes wide as a single snake emerges from the cracked earth, the viper from his inferno slithers rapidly through the brown grass that withers before Will’s eyes. Ravens hover, clawed feet extended and beaks open, as the viper slinks over the denuded ground, stark and dust filled like his inferno.

Will closes his eyes, just for a moment, his dreams of embattled vipers rolling along charred earth tumble with images of full red lips and golden tresses pressing against the bars of his cell at BSHCI…

I believe you…

Jack is nearly ninety-nine percent certain the hair belongs to no one other than Bedelia Du Maurier. But why Hannibal would place her hair in the tableau is mystifying. The circumstances under which he procured the hair are equally baffling. Jack decides to wait and see if Will comes to the same conclusion. Will does not know what he knows about Du Maurier, but he may infer it. Jack needs to know if Will knows she is here and he needs to know if she is with Hannibal. Jack wonders again at the nature of that particular relationship. Jack rubs at temples that throb from too much thinking and too little water today.

The blonde hairs present an entirely different can of worms. The questions and possibilities plow through Will's mind, churning up associations too fleeting to nail down.

"Could the blonde hair be a reference to Mason Verger? Absent the real thing, he just used what he could find to include a threat? I mean…blonde hair in a garni says dinner table to me."

Daniel presses thumb to lips, teeth working on the nail and he feels dread or something close thump suddenly in his chest as he glances at Will standing mute beside him.

Will feels numb. The creature stirs behind him, its talons circling his waist beneath the wilted cotton of his shirt to rest upon the wound, a pulsing thread along his stomach. He forces himself to respond, mentally massaging his mouth, coaxing words that spill from lips barely there.

"Except that Hannibal would not…condescend to spoiling his table with Mason. But…maybe the meal is intended for someone else. I don't know…" Will shakes his head and Jack is convinced Will is genuinely stumped at the moment.

"HEY! Heads up!" Pazzi's voice rings out from behind as all heads turn.

"What now?" Jack asks tersely, eyes up to fixate on the swarthy Polizia captain.

"We just found one of my officers, trussed up in a field, his uniform gone."

"Is he…alive?" Jack says.

"Yeah, he's okay. Dehydrated and sunburnt, but otherwise… Says he was hit from behind and everything went black. So we started running surveillance footage of the crime scene. We don't have much, the vantage points are limited, but check this out."

Pazzi pulls up video on his phone as everyone crowds around, except Will.

Will already knows what Pazzi is about to show everyone. He can only wonder if Hannibal intended to be on camera, or if he did not know that cameras had been set up to record. He thinks the former. Hannibal left the Polizia officer alive for a reason. There is always a reason Hannibal does what he does. And Will has an entire crime scene, two actually, to analyze in an effort to figure that out.

Will ambles forward to peek over Daniel's shoulder, aware of Jack's gaze at his back. It settles, heavy and pervasive, as the weight of the wings he carries shifts.

Chapter End Notes

Next time – Everyone wants to know what Hannibal is up to showing up at the crime scene, including Will. Hannibal pays Du Maurier a visit. Will tries to determine who will fuck with him first – Jack or Pazzi. Daniel, Alia, and Will visit the Uffizi with startling results…

And Happy Mother's Day!

Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

> Everyone wants to know what Hannibal was doing at the crime scene, including Will. Hannibal visits Du Maurier and things get physical. Will and Daniel finally return to Fiesole.
>
> Du Maurier squirms beneath, brings her hands to his throat and presses her thumbs into his Adam's apple. Remarkably, infuriatingly, he chuckles and licks the blood from his lips as he bites into her flesh again, this time the tender skin above her collar bone scrapes against sharp teeth.
>
> "Hannibal!"
>
> "Why so passive?" Hannibal says between nibbles, "You think you will injure me?"
>
> Du Maurier was not prepared for this game and berates herself for not seeing the game sooner. Seeing Graham has roused appetites she cannot hope to appease. Nor does she desire to. She glares at Hannibal with the realization that he thinks she will be providing him with a surrogate this evening. Her mind freezes suddenly with thoughts of where that might lead. She bolts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 64

Everyone wants to know what Hannibal was doing at the crime scene, including Will. Hannibal visits Du Maurier and things get physical. Will and Daniel finally return to Fiesole.

Lilith, Roberto Ferri

The figures walking forward and backward on the three inch by two inch screen are too small to recognize as they move in and out of the frame. Daniel and Will both lean in to Pazzi's phone, crowding out Jack in the process. Jack doesn't have to say anything, Daniel looks another moment then retreats, allowing the experts their turn. He finds watching Pazzi as interesting as watching the video.

There must be something incriminating for Pazzi to feel so satisfied, although Daniel does not need his empathy to read the smug expression as his gaze shifts from Crawford to Will while they look into the phone. Pazzi conveys a constant state of alertness to Daniel although he tries to appear nonchalant. Daniel decides he is far too arrogant for that. He is a creature constantly in search of opportunity in the many forms that can take. Daniel has felt the insecurity from the man as Pazzi's eyes have roamed hawk like over everyone all afternoon, constantly drawing comparisons to himself, and Daniel senses envy, folding into a dried husk deep inside when Pazzi looks at Jack Crawford.

Daniel thinks Pazzi may have been overlooked for another position, a promotion maybe. He reminds Daniel of the second string quarter back in high school, never quite good enough to start the game and has viewed every subsequent interaction in his world the same way ever since. Everyone is out to make him feel badly about himself. Daniel thinks the badge he wears is a source of pride as well as a burden. The pride is inflated and the burden is the fear of fucking up, simply put.

He is especially attuned to Jack Crawford, practically challenging him every chance he gets, but in a way that appears deferential on the surface. Pazzi has a way offending that speaks to passive-aggressive tendencies. When Will challenges Jack, it is to actually argue a point, a legitimate counter offered for consideration. Will may be rude, but the challenge is to an idea, not to Jack's authority.

Pazzi wants Jack to know he is challenging him, wants him to know he is being disrespectful, but in a way that Jack can't address or even mention because doing so makes him appear insecure about himself and his position. He challenges Will, too. Will is an easy target, already marginalized, but oddly the point person. Pazzi apparently resents this dynamic.

Pazzi treats Will dismissively. He is clearly threatened by Will or why else attack him every chance he gets. Daniel can't figure out exactly what it is he finds so threatening about Will, but Pazzi's emotional reactions to Will while in his presence are almost primal in their purity. On some level, Pazzi's lizard brain has registered alarm and Pazzi has interpreted the signal through the highly subjective filter of ego.

It occurs to Daniel that every interaction is a rivalry for Pazzi. He can't be dismissive with Crawford, so he goes out of his way to demean Will. Will's behavior has triggered confusion, so Pazzi continues to poke the odd animal that defies his expectations. Daniel smirks realizing Will is deliberately handling Pazzi like he is handling Jack. Will has already profiled Pazzi. The superior predator is playing with his prey. The prey is oblivious.

Daniel can imagine Lecter's pathology a similar thing. Circling a room full of people, assessing the herd while he hunts, dismissing the unworthy until he finds his mark, some hapless fool who manages to offend with ignorance or rudeness, or worse, pretensions to superiority. Hannibal indulges his instincts for amusement. Will does not. At least, Daniel doesn't think so. Pazzi better hope not.

As Daniel looks out over the fields, mostly emptied of Polizia and FBI vehicles, he thinks of the figure in the security video. He has seen Lecter's visage planted on the pages of Tattle Crime, mostly photos copied and pasted from other websites or newspapers, the quality leaving a lot to be desired. Of course, the FBI had Lounds take down some of the photos in case some misguided individual might recognize Lecter at a Starbucks and attempt to confront him. He thinks Lecter has done a marvelous job of avoiding cameras for all the time he spent in Baltimore. Although his name appears frequently in news stories and gossip pages, his picture does not. The FBI has resorted to using his driver's license photo for their briefings.

He has no doubt that is Hannibal in the footage by the pinched expression on Will's face. Daniel thinks he sees the slightest of smiles in the curve of Will's lips, but he could be imagining it. What he feels from Will is not amusement; it is far darker than that. It's admiration.

Will concentrates on Hannibal's movements and direction. It seems to Will that he might have been leaving the slaughter pit, was maybe on his way out. As the footage runs, everyone gasps quietly as the figure they believe to be Hannibal actually sails right past none other than Jack Crawford who has just climbed out his car followed by Will, who does not notice him either. The video freezes and Pazzi plays it again.

"That son of bitch…" Jack mutters, grinding jaws and lips together.

"He…he walked right *past* you." Pazzi exclaims, transparently and inappropriately pleased to point out.

Pazzi rubs at his chin, fingers still holding a cigarette that he never seems to ash; preferring to let the sooty cinders fall where they may, which, at this particular moment seems to be atop Will's shoes. Will takes a couple steps backward, eyeing Pazzi who doesn't seem to notice, far too engrossed in the scene repeating on his smart phone.

Will wants a better look at the video. Hannibal does seem to walk right past Jack, but Will suspects Hannibal might have done something more than to brazenly defy wisdom by parading in front of the FBI.

“He doesn’t *usually* revisit his crimes, does he?” Pazzi says.

“No, he doesn’t.” Jack says, scratching at his beard.

“He didn’t kill the officer, either.” Pazzi says. “Doesn’t he *usually*?”

Pazzi’s insistence on using the word *usually* to describe Hannibal’s habits grates. Will is tempted to ask Pazzi if he has in fact, read the briefing on Hannibal and now considers himself an expert on what constitutes “usually” or if he has not read the briefing and is seeking clarification, in which case, he should be directed to actually read the file… Will is becoming more irritable by the minute. He needs to decompress someplace away from here.

“Why leave him alive?” Jack muses to no one in particular from behind Zeller’s head, “And…why am I still looking at this video on his phone?”

Zeller jumps out of his skin, closes his eyes as the shockwaves from Jack yelling in his ear recedes.

“Need some help?” Price offers.

“Nah, I got this…” Zeller holds out his hand to Pazzi’s phone. “Here, I’ll patch it to my work station.”

“I can do it. I’ll send it.” Pazzi says.

“Well, I can do it quicker, trust me.”

Pazzi inhales from his cigarette, then blows into Zeller’s upturned face. “I said I’ll take care of it. Where do you want me to send it?”

“Zee, go grab Inspector Sartori over there from Interpol. Tell him what I need. He’ll know where to send it.” Jack interrupts the tug of war to his right, jaw so tight he thinks he could snap bone.

“Thanks.” Pazzi says.

Jack parts his lips to say something to Pazzi but decides to drop it. He is surprised Will has kept the sarcasm to a minimum and thinks he would rather not invite Will to empathize with him. Will can be highly suggestible that way. Besides, Pazzi would just come back with something else and it would escalate on and on until Will would say something unforgivable. Jack is tired and he wants to go back to his hotel, take a shower and order something really decadent from the menu before collapsing into the huge bed that adorns his suite. He looks to Will who raises his brows at Pazzi and looks back to Jack.

“What do you think?” Jack says to Will who rubs at his lips thoughtfully.

“Better picture than the airport, daylight, better resolution, but the clothes and the cap…I mean I think so…definitely, but you’re not going to get a photo recognition ping off it. He’s in shadow, or someone else’s.”

Will hopes Zee returns with a laptop so they can zoom in on Hannibal’s hands. Will is pretty certain that Hannibal was aware of the cameras and his sense of humor or theatricality is on display.

“But you would know him anywhere, eh?” Pazzi says.

“I can practically smell him, Captain. Better hope you learn to.”

“Well, what’s he doing coming into the yard like that? If he didn’t come to admire his work, maybe he came to admire someone else’s?” Pazzi’s chin juts out, no mystery as to the someone he has in mind.

Jack lifts his head as though picking up a scent. Will remains quiet. *Ambiguity*, he thinks.

“Seems to me he’s doing a lot of things he doesn’t *usually* do.” Pazzi announces for everyone.

Will’s teeth lock. He thinks if Pazzi says it again he might have to thump him. Will rubs his temples. He really needs to get away from here. He glances down at the bottle of water in Daniel’s hand, nods toward it. The bottle is fresh, nearly full, and Daniel hands it off to Will who gulps immediately, the refreshing coolness spilling down his throat seems to quiet the throbbing immediately, as though drenching a lit match.

“Hey!” Zee calls from the van, “I’ve got it!”

It is stuffy and close inside the van but nobody complains. The engine is running and the air conditioning blows full blast, but there are too many bodies to have much effect. Will knows he is the only one who sees the glossy black feathers that curl around his neck and drape over his shoulders, the only one who sees the cluster of ravens collecting around the computer console. He rolls his neck to the side, shudders with the hot breath that tingles on his skin.

Your design is evolving. Your choices affect the physical structures of your brain.

Killing is changing the way I think.

Jack is glaring at the laptop as Zeller’s fingers glide over the keyboard trying to clean up the images. Will slides into the chair next to Zeller, Jack and Pazzi behind him.

“Lecter is up to something.” Jack says. “You are right, Captain. He never inserted himself into the investigation…until you, Will.”

“And we know why that was, Jack.” Will says, not even looking up from the laptop.

Pazzi folds his arms over his chest and looks to Jack. Pazzi thinks there must be layers and layers to the relationship between Agent Crawford and Graham. Layers that peel away the longer they are together.

Jack sighs, turns to Will, “Will…Alana wouldn’t. She recommended him. You know that.”

“I do now.” Will says, looking around at Jack, “She didn’t want you to put me out there, hoped Hannibal would concur.” Will sighs softly, tilts his head at Jack, his words released gently in a plume of air, “She couldn’t have known, any more than the rest of us.”

Will’s teeth find his lower lip and he draws the flesh inside, presses until it hurts as he thinks of Alana. Jack closes his eyes for a second, grunts in agreement before leveling tired brown eyes at Will once again.

“He had us all tripping over ourselves, even you. Especially…you.” Jack says, raising his finger at Will.

Will ignores the finger, the grimace and the puckering jowls. Plenty of blame to go around, he thinks. Jack did make a salient point, one that Will can use.

“You know, Jack…he got used to being involved in the crime scenes. Got spoiled on it. Imagine, somebody like him, being able to learn about investigations from the inside out.”

Jack almost groans, “I know. As if he needed any more exposure and we gave him a crash course in forensics for free.”

“Was hardly free, Jack.” Will frowns. “We all paid for it.”

Will looks to the floor, weary of the talk and impatient for another look at the video, but the ravens scamper along the metal and carpet and he closes his eyes in frustration. He takes a couple deep breaths, searching for a hint of sand and surf among the mix of cologne, tobacco, and sweat that fills his nostrils. It takes a moment, but Will at last detects the mist of salt and spray at the fringes of his mind.

Will catches the inquisitive glance from Daniel who has retreated to the open doors in the back. Daniel must be clamoring to leave as much as Will, his emotional shield as thin as paper by now. Will offers a quick smile of encouragement, realizing he hasn’t been much of shield for Daniel today. Will has left him to fend for himself and as Daniel leans against the carpet covered walls of the van in his wilted suit and damp hair, Will knows he has been taxed to his limits.

“Zee?” Will says, “Can you run it again and zoom in on just Jack?”

“Sure, give me a sec.” Zeller shakes himself out of his own reverie, lost for a moment in the exchange between Will and Jack.

“Are you saying he was invited to crime scenes with you guys?” Pazzi’s says in the irritating tone that threads through Will’s nerves like line spooling on one his fishing reels.

“In the capacity of psychiatrist. He’s published. An expert on psychoanalysis.” Jack responds quickly and he catches himself too late, a little too defensively.

“*Porco Dio*! You people…allowed him inside your investigations. Of him?” Pazzi is practically leaning over Will.

“Him…who?” Jack says, confused a moment, thinking that Hannibal had initially been tapped to psychoanalyze Will.

“Of other killers.” Will says, turning slightly, eyes sweeping the floor behind him to find Jack.

“Whose psychological profiles was he working on?” Pazzi says to Jack, an eye on Will.

Will and Jack exchange glances and Daniel feels the temperature inside the van crank up. Will rolls the chair back, stands up straight from the counter to face Pazzi, quickly deciding to shut this avenue of thought down. He blinks a couple times, but the ravens plucking at the laces of Pazzi’s expensive leather shoes remain.

“He was a consultant. Supposed to keep an eye on me, keep me stable…later, as another resource…for Jack. He was…helpful, in his own way.”

Pazzi stares hard at Will, thinking he hadn’t heard him correctly. Jack clears his throat, avoids looking at Will.

“We didn’t know he was the Ripper we were looking for, didn’t know he was manipulating behind the scenes. Wouldn’t have known except for Will. He’s the one who figured it out.” Jack says, “That’s why he is here. No one knows Lecter’s head better than he does.”

“You know how he thinks. That’s why you uh…went a little crazy?”

Pazzi taps his head at Will who has leaned down to see the footage Zeller has put up.

“Still am…a little crazy.” Will lifts his head, cranes his neck to look at Pazzi and Daniel almost winces. He knows that look. So does Jack.

Pazzi looks like he might yawn. “Crazy attracts crazy.” He says.

Crazy like a fox…. Will finds what he was looking for in the video, ignoring Pazzi he turns to Jack and points to the laptop screen.

“What have you got?” Jack says, leaning down to join Will at the console.

“Look here…He’s playing tag, Jack.”

“What?”

“Zee, slow it down.” Will says.

Sure enough, Hannibal actually taps Jack on the arm, just above the elbow as he passes by. Jack moves away from the car to allow Will to climb out behind him, but Hannibal is quickly swallowed up in the crowd of Polizia and FBI personnel milling about, who take no notice of him either. Although his face is obscured by cap and shadow, the demeanor and carriage recall Hannibal’s erect posture and commanding presence.

“Tag…you’re it. Another taunt.”

Will stands and stretches his arms up to the roof, pulling his cornflower shirt from his trousers as he does. Damp air hits his exposed skin and he sees Pazzi’s eyes trail over his body to rest at his waist. Will lowers his arms, as Pazzi shifts his gaze elsewhere. Will tucks his shirt back in, wondering how much Pazzi saw.

“Tag…as in…my move?” Jack is saying.

“Seems like it. He left the officer alive to let you know the rules.”

“Rules?”

“Hannibal’s rules of engagement. He’s not interested in bringing the Polizia into it. He sees this as between him and the FBI.”

“If he had killed one of us, he knows we would be more invested, out for blood.”

Pazzi reaches into jacket for his pack of cigarettes. He clutches the pack but pauses taking out another slender cigarette when Jack glares at him. Pazzi places the cigarette in his mouth but does not light it. He can wait. He thinks it is rather warm in the van, no reason to crank up the heat between him and Crawford even more. He nods at Jack and rolls the cigarette around his tongue instead, shifts his gaze to Will.

“Exactly. To his thinking, the fight, or the hunt, doesn’t involve the Polizia. He’s signaling he’ll leave them alone if they leave him alone.” Will says, attention distracted by Pazzi’s mouth and the cigarette dangling from it.

Jack clears his throat, accompanied by an exasperated sigh. “He doesn’t get to make the rules. You know, Will, I think we do need another playbook.”

Pazzi holds the cigarette between his teeth, smoothes his beard, fingers stroking idly as he ponders the latest message from this serial killing cannibal the FBI treats with kid gloves. And this Graham is pampered almost as much by Crawford. Pazzi cannot fathom why they allowed Graham to be here. Pazzi thinks Crawford pretty desperate to let someone as damaged as Graham call the shots for him, no matter how *close* he evidently got. He is clearly more a liability than an asset.The image of the scar along Graham’s stomach as he had raised his arms flashes. This Lecter got very close for sure. Pazzi cannot shake thoughts of a lover’s quarrel gone horribly bad from his mind. And yet, Graham seems to have made a connection with D’Angelo…

“Why this crime scene and not the other?” Pazzi says.

“Do you know for certain that he didn’t?” Will counters.

Pazzi is quiet. “We should look through traffic video for him there this morning. He is trying to insert himself into the investigations, isn’t he?”

“He can only do that this time by manipulating the evidence. He can’t influence the narrative or interpretation face to face.”

“But, there’s no doubt in your mind, it’s him.” Pazzi says.

All eyes turn to Will and the attention nearly overwhelms in the close confines of the humid van. Will would take a few steps backward, but there is no room. He rewinds the footage in his mind, thinks of Hannibal removing the clothes of the unconscious Polizia officer, then walking boldly through the gates, the cap pulled down low to hide the face. The beard is unexpected, but effective. He had not noticed a beard as Hannibal had stood at the bottom of the hill. A beard does alter one’s appearance drastically, though Will does not doubt a certain sentimentality surfaces every time Hannibal touches his face. He wonders if Hannibal actually grew it or if it is applied. The FBI issue jacket and trousers fit well enough to avoid detection, but though Hannibal had wanted them to *recognize* him in the surveillance footage, he had not wanted them to really *see* him. He had ensured his screen time was short as he had walked through the maze of agents of officers.

Will nods in answer to Pazzi. “Time stamp?” Will asks.

“Early, just after the FBI arrived obviously, display says two thirty-four.” Zeller says.

“How did you find the Polizia officer?” Will asks Pazzi.

“Like I said, trussed up, sunburnt and dehydrated…”

“I mean, how was he trussed up? Tied…how?”

Annoyance is written all over Pazzi’s face as he looks alternately between Jack and Will. He is getting a little tired of the FBI attaching meaning and importance to everything this Lecter does, and even more irritating, they seem bent on allowing his former boyfriend to lead them around by their noses. He thinks it no wonder Lecter got away.

“What now? That’s important? You two act like if he picks his nose, the earth moves and God weeps.”

Jack brushes a finger over his own nose, lets it rest on his lips. He nudges Will at his side, “What are you thinking, Will?”

“Nothing concrete, yet. Was he gagged, or blindfolded?”

“Both, with his socks. We’re running that through forensics…”

Will waves his hand dismissively. “What is his name?”

“Buccieri, Guglielmo Buccieri.”

Will looks to Daniel, who has been observing quietly, his own thoughts rather tasty at the moment as he raises his brows at Will. Will’s Italian is pretty good, but he is looking to Daniel for affirmation.

“It’s a message.” Daniel says from his post at the back of the van.

“For whom?” Jack says.

“For Will. Guglielmo is the Italian version of William. And Buccieri…”

“Old name,” Pazzi interrupts, the smug expression melts, “when families took names from their trade. Means butcher.”

“Well…what’s the message?” Jack frowns.

His stomach is rumbling in a sea of acid and his head pounding. If Hannibal doesn’t kill him outright this time, Jack is sure the stress of catching him is sending him to an early grave. A sentence Jack doesn’t find entirely unwelcome. He waits for Will’s, or Clayton’s answer. Clayton is very perceptive, almost as perceptive as Will, uncannily so.

“I think he’s insulting me, Jack. I’ve become too blind and too deaf to find him. And he won’t believe anything I say.”

Jack looks to Daniel, as does Pazzi.“You concur?” Jack says, and he feels like he is talking to Will. The visual is unsettling.

“Yeah, I would have to agree.” Daniel lies, and the lie bothers him, but not as much as the suspicion he feels from both Jack and Pazzi. Suspicion he is sure is directed at Will.

He’s not sure what the message is, but whatever Will just said is definitely not it. The apprehension he has felt all day settles in his chest and he cannot place what has prompted it. Too many bodies and emotions surrounding him, clouding his senses. He needs to get away from here. Clear his head.

Ruggerio pokes his head in the back of the van, looks up at Clayton and smiles, “Hey…still here? Misery loves company, eh?”

Daniel rolls his eyes in answer and looks out the open back for Alia but does not see her. Ruggerio places a foot on the bumper and leans inside. Pazzi turns around to greet his detective.

“*Cosa succeed, Capo?* “

“*Non molto.* Are we heading out?”

“Yeah, you coming?” Ruggerio rubs a hand through his hair, pushes the straight black bangs off his forehead. “*Che palle*, it’s hot in here…”

“Yeah…I’m coming. See you tomorrow Agent Crawford? Piazza Repubblica, right?”

“Bright and early. Ciao, Captain.” Jack says waving him off.

“Oh, not too early.” Pazzi laughs as he heads toward the back. “I have dinner plans with my wife. Ciao.” Pazzi climbs out of the van to join Ruggerio. The silence quickly becomes uncomfortable and it seems to Daniel they had all held their collective breath until he disappeared from view.

Jack considers touching on the topic of the blonde hairs again with Will. He glances at Will who sits lost in thought, eyes distant though he faces the computer screen frozen on the image of Hannibal in the yard. He looks as deflated as Jack feels. Jack has to concede Will had held his own today, had delivered his interpretations and assessments with his usual focused intensity. There had been moments when Jack had found himself falling into familiar patterns with Will. He wants to trust Will, and Will knows Jack wants to trust him, and this is why Jack can’t. Not completely.

Jack will have to watch and wait if Will attempts to make contact with Hannibal on his own. At the moment, Jack is certain Will has no idea where Hannibal is any more than he does. But Hannibal knows Will is here, knows Jack is here. Jack knows Hannibal will not resist the temptation to taunt them. Jack hopes Hannibal feels the noose closing around his neck and Jack intends to catch more than smoke this time.

Zeller clears out from the console, receives a nod from Jack to leave and glances at Will. Jack shakes his head and Zeller brushes past Daniel on his way out, squeezes his shoulder as he dismounts from the van. Daniel watches him go and then turns back to Jack who is now wiping tissues across his throat. He imagines the scar along his throat a bit irritated with all the perspiration and humidity. He tries not to fidget too much as he waits for Crawford to dismiss them. At least he thinks that is what Will is waiting for.

Jack drops the frayed tissues into the wastebasket and leans over to click off the laptop. Zeller must have thought it rude to shut it off if Will was still looking at it. Jack knows Will is not even in the room right now. He blinks back the fatigue and thinks he will sleep like the proverbial log tonight, unlike Will, whose mind never sleeps.

He thinks he’ll save the discussion of the blonde hairs for tomorrow, let Will sleep or dream on it. The forensic evidence will have to be shared with Interpol and Polizia at some point, but it is in Jack’s best interest he let them infer what they want. Du Maurier is an unknown variable. If she is in Florence, with Hannibal, she should be contacting him any time now. He thinks it possible that Hannibal left the blonde hairs to let Jack know he has Du Maurier, perhaps even that he is on to her. Jack doubts Du Maurier's complicity in the current situation. She has been a pawn in all of this, protecting her interests whatever they are, but still a pawn. Hannibal may be intending to sacrifice his pawn and Jack thinks he does not want to find a tableau featuring Du Maurier.

Jack sighs as he touches Will's shoulder causing Will to flinch and eyes to blink him into the moment. Will looks up, and cheeks flush with a trace of embarrassment. Jack almost smiles as he watches Will twist his legs from beneath the console to stand up.

As much as he would like Will's input on Du Maurier, he doesn't want to push Will too hard. Will has enough to deal with this evening as his mind is already grappling with the threads Hannibal has introduced. And his hotel room beckons.

Jack almost groans aloud at the thought he forgot to arrange for the security detail around Clayton's house.

"You and Doctor Clayton should go get some sleep."

Will stares at the business card Jack slides across the counter at him. "Daniel already called for a cab. It's outside. What's this?"

"The address for our temporary headquarters in Florence. Look, I don't know how soon I can get you security."

"What did Mason say last time you talked to him?"

"The Paolini are sitting tight for the moment. I think they have been told conflicting stories about you and they want to see where the investigation leads. They are still a threat, but not an immediate one."

Jack thinks he can let the matter of the reward wait until tomorrow as well. The reward is for Hannibal, not for Will although the Paolini can claim the reward, too. Verger has managed to find a most abhorrent means of keeping the Paolini on a leash. Jack needs time to think how he can turn this sordid mess to his advantage without getting Will killed in the process. Or Clayton.

"The Paolini have everything to gain by waiting. That would be the smart move. I'm not fond of the idea of being a sitting duck, but I don't think sending a security detail the best idea. The Paolini have contacts within Polizia. It's how they know so much. No one knows where I am staying right now."

"You think the Polizia will send the Paolini right to you?" Jack frowns, rubs his face, "I can hold off on requesting a detail for a while. You okay with that?"

"I don't sleep well anyway, Jack. See you tomorrow. Cab's waiting."

"Good night, Will, Doctor Clayton."

Jack watches them walk to the cab and considers inviting Clayton to headquarters tomorrow. Jack yawns and decides to sleep on it.

The ride to Siena is blistering hot along the road, despite the glorious orange sky Hannibal sees as the sun dips to the horizon. The wind blowing into his visor and cutting into his black jumpsuit is also spitefully hot and Hannibal is relieved when he can veer off the highway to take the rolling road of spacious villas where Du Maurier resides.

There had been no sign of Polizia patrolling the roads on his way here. The Polizia would seem to be operating under FBI jurisdiction and Jack Crawford has no choice but to follow the FBI playbook where the public is concerned. The city of Florence is already tense now that the news of the twins' tableaux has been spread. An increased and visible police presence would invite panic. The FBI will insist on caution and the sight of Polizia around Florence accordingly unobtrusive and easy to identify.

Hannibal is confident Will will locate him and Du Maurier long before the FBI does. Will has at least agreed to entertain conversation without law enforcement. Whether or not law enforcement follows him is another matter.

Will's tableau had been impressive, almost as impressive as the man himself. The binoculars had permitted an unobstructed view of Will, up close. So close, Hannibal had been able to see his nostrils quiver as he had breathed. The sight of those pale blue eyes in the sunlight had caused a tightening in his chest and the binoculars had faltered in his grip. The bewilderment on Will's exquisite face at his approach had melted, replaced by the spark of recognition. His lips and eyes had softened as Hannibal had gazed through the lens at him if only for the briefest of moments before shifting his attentions to the sea of FBI and Polizia jackets around him.

The suit had fit him handsomely; probably one of Clayton's but Will had worn the stylish cut of the blazer and trousers with ease. The tousled mane of curls had been trimmed, likely for Jack, and the beard similarly clipped. Will had looked nothing like the wild unadorned predator Hannibal had watched pacing on the patio. He had provided Jack with the well dressed, well-coiffed civility he would have expected and wanted today.

Hannibal had glimpsed Clayton briefly among the throng, but suspects Jack or Will had quickly ushered him inside the slaughter house away from the cameras and journalists. Clayton had dressed nearly identically to Will, and he had admittedly presented as every bit as striking. The similarities between them are likely no longer limited to the physical. Not after this weekend. Uncle Jack has his hands full.

Will's tableau of Luciano is convincing. As Hannibal pulls up to the villa that precedes Du Maurier's and shuts off the ignition, he thinks again of the beauty of it. So ingenious of Will to utilize the cold conceptualism of cubism to disguise the intimate messages he chose to include. The allusion to Michelangelo's Adam through the unmistakable gestures of Luciano's hands had touched Hannibal with the poignancy of the sentiment. He hopes the sentiment is genuine and not another product of Will's magnificent imagination.

Without even seeing Lucia's tableau, Will had endowed his tableau of Luciano with passionate imagery of a kind he was often reluctant to entertain in Hannibal's presence. The sentiment so passionate he had seen fit to bury it in fragments and pieces too ambiguous for anyone to decipher but Hannibal. Hannibal has gathered up Will's shards trusting they do not draw blood this time.

In rigor, Will had bestowed life upon Luciano's severed hands by invoking Adam and his creator, the inverse of Hannibal's tableau that spoke to death and the underworld. Hannibal had looked down, and Will, his precious Will had looked up. If every creative act has its destructive consequence then so too does creation arise from the destruction. Will remains the morning to Hannibal's night.

And while the triumphant tableau persuades, indicating Will has accepted he embodies both created and creator, his power is limited so long as he dwells among the Greeks in his inferno. Until the Trojans can be vanquished, Achilles must allow Patroclus the protection of the Greeks a while longer.

Hannibal dismounts and quickly removes the jumpsuit. He straightens his shirt, presses the twill trousers against his legs to soothe the wrinkles from the soft blue fabric and slips the items he does not need neatly into the knapsack he ties to the Ducati. His movements are quick, precise as he tucks the jacket under the seat and secures the helmet. He glances at his watch, smiles with thoughts of Du Maurier as he adjusts the silver band around his wrist. He imagines Du Maurier has been glued to her tv all afternoon. He is impressed with her restraint. She did not call, not even once. He thinks she waits with a weapon or with open legs. Either will do.

The soft chime of the doorbell sends Du Maurier's heart fluttering as she checks her watch. Hannibal has been busy. She unwinds her legs from beneath her and slips them into the white leather pumps at the foot of the couch. She walks slowly toward the door, shoes sink into luxurious carpet, hands straightening skirt then blouse, finally tucking a golden lock of hair behind an ear so the diamond earring glitters catching light as does the necklace of crushed diamonds at her throat.

She opens the door and allows a smile to spread over berry red lips. "Good evening, Hannibal."

"Bedelia…" Hannibal waits a moment, drinks up Du Maurier with a critical eye and judges the viper stunning this evening. "May I come in?"

"Of course." Perfectly manicured hands grip the doorknob and the door swings wide for Hannibal to enter the viper's pit. As Hannibal enters the living room he notices the tv first, the news spreads across the wide mounted screen, the sound muted of course. His gaze shifts to the large square coffee table of polished mahogany and cut glass, psychology journals and fashion magazines sit next to the bottle of wine chilling in cracked ice. There are two glasses, one already filled with the fragrant pale yellow liquid Du Maurier cannot live without.

"You were expecting me."

"Where else would you go? After serving up that fine feast for the FBI your first thought is to come…here."

Du Maurier folds her arms over her bosom, with one hand she reaches to fondle the bejeweled necklace shimmering at her throat. She looks expectantly at Hannibal, adopting what has become the very tiresome attitude of long suffering adult about to chastise a child. Du Maurier reminds herself Hannibal is still very much a child, still exploring his universe, still the adolescent playing in his garden of delights except his toys are fashioned from breath and bone.

And he wants his playmate back, desperately so. Du Maurier can read it from every crease in his face, detect the promise of it wafting from every pore as Hannibal stands flushed from his ride. She knows he rode the Ducati here, another indication of the sheer joy that percolates from beneath the suit he wears for her now. Hannibal has glimpsed his beloved Graham today.

Hannibal tilts his head at Du Maurier as if to chide her for her derisive tone. She is intoxicatingly beautiful right now, a most deadly combination of exquisite charm and viciousness that nearly matches his own. Nearly.

“I must confess coming here was not my…first thought.” He lifts his chin and raises a brow.

“Perhaps your second thought, then. Have you seen Graham?” The smile thins a little.

Du Maurier has prepared a script it would seem. Hannibal is content to play along, for a while. Hannibal gestures toward the coffee table and the empty glass of long stemmed crystal, her finest and wonders briefly how many bottles she imbibed before he arrived. He leans over the opened bottle, sniffs and takes the perspiring bottle from the ice and inspects the label.

“Ah, one of the vintages from Fiesole. May I?”

Du Maurier gestures with her glass, “By all means.” She watches Hannibal pour from the lip of her own glass.

Hannibal holds the glass to his nose and inhales the bouquet, and deciding there is indeed nothing in the glass but wine, he takes a sip. The flavor of ripened fruit, peaches he thinks mingled with citrus bursts on his tongue, the finish perfectly dry and metallic. He smacks his lips, the taste lingers and he stares into the glass as he speaks.

“I did see Will – at the crime scene. The one at the slaughter house. Watched him climb out of an FBI sedan right behind Jack Crawford.”

“The FBI arrived quickly. I suppose your investigator could not locate Graham for a good reason.”

“Agent Crawford has been keeping him close. They did arrive quickly, didn’t they?”

“Too quickly, even for the FBI. Who were the victims, Hannibal?”

“A brother and sister, twins actually, hired to find me and kill me. I found them first.”

“How did you find them?” Du Maurier knows nothing with Hannibal is simple. She wonders how far from his garden he wandered this time.

“I was alerted to their…sleuthing by a former associate, concerned about their inquiries.”

“What sort of inquiries?”

“Family ties. Ancestry. Assets…you understand.”

“Who were they, Hannibal? Again, must I remind you how much I appreciate your…candor where our assets are concerned? Eventually, this sleuthing would have led to me.” Du Maurier raises her brows, a pensive gesture and indicative of genuine concern.

The concern is for the assets, not Hannibal’s well-being or any bodily harm that might have resulted. Hannibal thinks Du Maurier might have contacted Mason herself had she any inkling of the events that had transpired between them. As it is, he is now obliged to disclose a version of those events to her.

“The twins were members of a local family, a crime family, Paolini. This family has ties in the US, with a former patient of mine, Mason Verger.” Hannibal waits until Du Maurier’s face ripples with understanding.

“You caused his accident.”

Hannibal sinks into the couch, splays his fingers along the rich rose colored suede and pats the cushions, inviting Du Maurier to sit beside him. He lifts the glass to his lips as he lifts his eyes to Du Maurier’s lovely face, pinched with consternation though it is. She comes around from the rear of the couch, hips swaying seductively as she winds her way to the front, a snake slithering to nestle into the arm at the far end of the couch so she can gaze at Hannibal without craning her neck.

“After he sent the cousins of the recently deceased to kill me.” Hannibal says after Du Maurier has settled upon the soft suede.

“And why did he want to kill you? Who put that thought in his head?” She crosses her legs, careful to arrange them so the silky skin of creamy thighs peeks out from the skirt. Slivers of flesh meant to entice. And they do.

“Mason presents as a paradox. He is at once completely self-absorbed and bereft of empathy for anyone but himself but exists in the shadow of his father. He has a twin sister, treats her badly, abusively. She must endure it because their father left the entire estate to the brother. The family a classic example of generational misogyny.”

Du Maurier nods her head, “The sister also a patient? Hannibal…you pitted them against one another. The sister lost. The brother found out.”

“Essentially, yes.”

“And he employed the services of this family in Florence. Contacted Crawford when they went…missing?”

“I suppose. They are Sardinians, but with extended family in Tuscany. I have learned a lot about them. When I found what they were up to, I had to…dispose of them.”

“You used them as a means to signal the FBI and Graham.”

“My investigator was not very forthcoming with details. But Mason…is predictable.”

“You should have told me.”

“I am telling you now.” Hannibal says. Du Maurier’s eyes flash as she swirls her wine.

“What do you intend to do with the assets transferred earlier today?” Du Maurier does not think to thank Hannibal. Her patience was thanks enough.

“An interesting question and one I do not have the answer to. Presently.”

“Then, why transfer them at all?” She takes a generous gulp of the wine, licks her lips and Hannibal allows the befuddlement to thicken upon her tongue.

Hannibal has anticipated the question. Of course Du Maurier is suspicious, but she cannot with any certainty clarify the source of her anxiety without knowing the information Hannibal withholds from her. His cousin will use the money to negotiate with the Paolini. Those funds represent one account. Another, is a decoy account. The properties along the Chesapeake are now Hannibal's to do with as he pleases.

"Will may or may not be prepared to see our association come to an end. Despite reports of mental instability, he seemed…healthy enough today at the crime scene. I transferred the assets in anticipation of two possible outcomes."

"Which are…"

"The first - in case he requires resources to leave Florence should he desire to finally break his ties with the FBI and Jack Crawford. The other, if he demonstrates his intentions nothing other than to apprehend or kill me, then the account can be used to frame him."

Du Maurier reclines, takes a languid sip from her glass and lifts sapphire eyes to Hannibal. "How would the account frame Graham? For what would you frame him?"

"Murder of course."

"Who?"

Du Maurier thinks of herself, first, and then dismisses the thought. There is considerable collateral sitting in Switzerland. She presumes Clayton, but is not sure Hannibal knows Graham resides with his fetching psychiatrist. And if he does, how does that bode for her? She sips at her wine thinking their discussion likely to be quite long and complicated this evening. She had not seen Clayton on the news, but that does not mean he was not there although she cannot think of any reason for Crawford to have him there, unless, Crawford had wanted him to keep an eye on Graham, as he had done with Hannibal.

Jack Crawford appears to tread along paths he has treaded before, compulsively. Wasn't it Einstein who once said insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results? Her conversations with Crawford had not left her with an especially generous opinion of the man and Du Maurier acknowledges it is to her advantage that he remains predictable in his patterns of behavior.

"I'm sure an opportunity will present itself. When and if that scenario plays out, there will be an account waiting for him under an assumed name in the Caymans." Hannibal drains his glass, pours himself another. He is feeling…invigorated.

"What name would that be, and how would it be traced to Graham?"

"The name on the account is Mariah W. Gillam." Hannibal waits.

Du Maurier's face lights up, a wicked smile tugs at her lips. "An anagram…for William Graham. Hannibal…"

"I think even the FBI can figure that out. It will appear that Will and I enjoyed a joint venture, despite his anticipated cries to the contrary."

"Do you believe he will try and contact you?"

“I can’t imagine how except through the press. He will attempt to taunt me with provocative statements intended to wound.”

“That would be the expectation if he plans on apprehending you. What if his intentions are other? How would you know?”

“Will is resourceful. There are enough clues in the tableaux should he want to see them.”

“You risk him divulging what he sees to Crawford. You risk exposure. You risk not only your life, but mine.”

“An unfortunate if not regrettable consequence, but necessary.”

“It was not necessary, Hannibal. I have been patient, generous. You return my kindnesses by trapping us both here.”

“How so? You are free to leave anytime you like. Always have been if that is what you desire.”

Du Maurier does not shrink from the dark eyes that devour her now. Hannibal clearly suspects an association between her and Crawford. He intends to exploit it, or expose it in order to play his game with Graham.

She reaches across the couch, an interminable expanse if there ever was one, and takes his hand in hers, strokes the smooth skin that betrays nothing of the violence she knows broils beneath.

“I believe my release from FBI custody caused Agent Crawford considerable grief in the wake of what followed. He has had a year to consider the part I play in this drama. You may be the one on the poster, Hannibal, but Jack Crawford has not put his concerns about me to rest, I assure you. He may not understand the nature of our relationship, but he suspects.”

“Agent Crawford would not think you would tell me of your…visit to FBI headquarters?”

“Doubtful. Not from what I told him. I am a very convincing casualty of your…influence, Hannibal. Graham identified with that. So did Agent Crawford.”

Hannibal thinks her so convincing because she believes herself a casualty, and she is. But a victim of her own design, not Hannibal’s.

“Then we remain…partners.” Hannibal says, curling his fingers around the slender hand that paints his palm with a patina of deceit with every pass of her fingers.

“If closure is what is required to finally relieve you of this…obsession then it would seem I am compelled to yet again stand aside…and watch.”

“And should Jack Crawford find you again?”

“That would depend upon you, Hannibal. Would you give me reason to send the FBI in your direction?”

“Our present arrangement pleases, if not excites.” Hannibal sets his nearly empty glass on the coffee table, stretches his body along the couch to take a carelessly extended white pump in hand. He loosens the shoe from her heel, slips it to the carpet. The other shoe follows, it drops soundlessly onto plush carpet, a sea of green around the rose colored couch.

Du Maurier pulls Hannibal toward her by his collar, marvels at the elegance of the man, the sharpness of the cheek bones and the finely drawn mouth. His lips part as he leans in to kiss her. She places two fingers between them, trails them along Hannibal's upper lip, then down to trace the slope of his jaw, his whiskers a curious sensation.

"I'm not sure I like the beard on you." Du Maurier says.

"Then, who would you like it on?" Hannibal teases.

Du Maurier smiles and brings up both hands to caress his face. Hannibal's lips spread at the touch, knowing Du Maurier prefers smooth skin but she is intrigued nonetheless for the associations the touching surely conjures for her. He takes a thumb to her cheek, draws it across her face, her skin flawlessly smooth like porcelain, but warm. Her hair falls forward and she laughs as Hannibal reaches for a lock of gold.

Du Maurier turns her head, takes his hand into her mouth and bites playfully. Hannibal leans in to nuzzle her neck, then ear, finally settling upon lips that he shoves from his hand with gentle nudges of his nose.

Du Maurier inhales Hannibal, takes in the scent of him as she grapples with him on the couch, lips crush together and tongues dance, the taste of wine tart upon their lips. Hannibal begins to unbutton her blouse and she sits up to accommodate the practiced fingers that pluck at buttons one by one to her navel. He tugs the blouse from her skirt, and frowns at the belt before deftly unfastening that too, and then reaching a hand between her legs to slide upwards along silky thighs to find panties already moist and more silky smooth skin beneath the satiny fabric sliding between his fingers.

Du Maurier moans as a finger slips inside, crushing her lips onto his again, the rhythm of the undulating finger sending tremors through her body. Sensualist that he is, Hannibal never fails to please.

Her mouth clings to his as she draws his tongue inside and sucks. Du Maurier trembles beneath him, nipples erect and protruding from the delicate fabric of her bra as her body twists along the couch. Hannibal thinks her reactions not unlike Will's, though he had found Will's tongue highly sensitive to stimulation and unbelievably *insatiable* he thinks the appropriate word.

Du Maurier is similarly orally fixated, but from quite another angle. Hannibal knows what she likes, what she prefers and he has indulged her, has brought her to tears if truth be told. That…will not be the case this evening he thinks as he pulls back from the suction cup that her mouth has become and removes his finger from the moist glove below.

"Shall we…" Hannibal nods towards the stairs.

Du Maurier plucks at the buttons on his shirt, fingernails scrape along his collarbone as she looks up into his face. "You would remove your suit for me tonight, Hannibal?"

"I would let you rip it from me if that is what you desire." He takes her in his mouth again.

"Will you keep your appointment with Clayton this week?" Du Maurier asks as she slips off her skirt and shimmies the white panties down her slender frame.

Hannibal reclines on the bed watching her remove her clothing and admiring the toned limbs as she steps out of the panties. She climbs in beside him and he runs his hands over the pleasingly curvaceous swell of her belly, a bit of plumpness from the wine she has been unable to lose at the gym. Hannibal prefers the sensuousness of flesh beneath his fingers, of meat on the bones.

"I am still considering. My appointment is Wednesday…almost a lifetime away. While I have enjoyed our sessions, I think the risk outweighs the benefit given the location of his office. Will you continue your canine therapy with your patient and Clayton?"

"As long as it suits to keep up appearances. Perhaps you should consider keeping your appointment for the same reason, if nothing than to know if he suspects his patient and the killer on tv are the same person."

"Florence and its environs are vast. It is unlikely he has come to that conclusion. I would think the idea improbable to him. Perhaps I will indulge myself one more visit with him. He is…a balm for the soul."

Du Maurier wrinkles her nose wondering if she detects sarcasm or something else. Hannibal is in an exceptionally good mood which is not necessarily a good thing. He is a creature of habit and his tendency to become caught up in his own cunning is perhaps what she is seeing now in this bed.

The glock remains buried beneath satin table cloths downstairs. It is not inconceivable that Hannibal suspects and deliberately separated her from her weapon of choice. She is not without weapons here, but bullets are so much more…effective.

Hannibal reaches for her suddenly and she finds herself pinned to the mattress, his broad strong hands upon her narrow shoulders, and his knee between her legs. He positions the other knee between her thighs and pushes her legs apart. Du Maurier lifts her chin and lets her head roll to the side as she spreads her hair along the crimson pillows, a vision she knows Hannibal enjoys.

"You are most lovely, like this." Hannibal says leaning down to bite into her lower lip. She winces and turns her head, but his teeth hold her in place, a little too painfully. He kneads her lips with his teeth until she relents and opens her mouth wider to receive what punishment waits. He assaults her tongue next, biting until he draws blood.

Du Maurier squirms beneath, brings her hands to his throat and presses her thumbs into his Adam's apple. Remarkably, infuriatingly, he chuckles and licks the blood from his lips as he bites into her flesh again, this time the tender skin above her collar bone scrapes against sharp teeth.

"Hannibal!"

"Why so passive?" Hannibal says between nibbles, "You think you will injure me?"

Du Maurier was not prepared for this game and berates herself for not seeing the game sooner. Seeing Graham has roused appetites she cannot hope to appease. Nor does she desire to. She glares at Hannibal with the realization that he thinks she will be providing him with a surrogate this evening. Her mind freezes suddenly with thoughts of where that might lead. She bolts.

Hannibal wrestles Du Maurier back to the bed, taking the slaps and punches to his face in stride. Du Maurier is feisty in her resistance, but she will be screaming, begging Hannibal not to stop soon enough. If she truly wishes to share intimacy with Hannibal, she should let go of her inhibitions and trust that his ravaging of her will ultimately appease the demons she too keeps locked inside.

Control is best left to those who know how to administer it. Du Maurier has had her illusions. Hannibal will now shatter them for her and she will implore him to do it again. Hannibal straddles her on the bed, belly up and legs wide apart, pinned beneath his muscled thighs as he leans over her.

Hannibal massages the glistening mound of hairless flesh and pushes a finger inside causing her to moan and twist though her head lifts from the satin pillow to watch him, sapphire eyes blazing with alarm and the hatred Hannibal has always known was there.

This is not the hate that had spilled from Will as they had rocked upon his bed in Baltimore. Du Maurier's hatred spins with venom and spite, directed solely at Hannibal. Will had hated the weakness in himself, had hated that Hannibal could draw it out of him, and the hate had blossomed into something else, something unique between them.

Hannibal slips another finger inside, and another causing Du Maurier to raise her hips off the mattress and arms to flail. She manages to sit up and reaches for Hannibal's throat. He leans backward just enough so that the manicured nails fall short of scraping his skin.

"Lie back and enjoy yourself, my dear…" Hannibal coos.

Du Maurier wrests herself free of the twisting fingers and wriggles away to claw her way to the edge of the bed. Hannibal pulls her back as her fingers clamor for purchase among the satin sheets spread along the mattress toppling down to drape along the carpet. Hannibal chuckles and the sound of the rich throaty taunt is maddening.

"Hannibal…I invite you to my bed with certain expectations."

"Expectations, like boundaries, are negotiable. You think you know me?"

"Knowing you…is a work in progress."

"You did ask that I take off my suit for you…"

Du Maurier's eyes grow wide and Hannibal cradles her head against his sturdy chest even as she rakes with her nails.

"Aren't you curious?" He breathes into her ear.

"About…what?" Du Maurier sinks her teeth into the bicep that holds her tight.

She immediately feels the grip of Hannibal's fingers wind around a sizable swath of her hair and pull. The pain is sharp when it comes and she opens her mouth, stares at the imprint on his flesh. When she looks up, Hannibal's eyes are unreadable, almost vacant. A chill runs up her spine to collide with the heat erupting from her scalp.

"Curious about my fantasies. I have indulged yours. Time to indulge mine." Hannibal says, tightening his grip on her hair.

"You would force yourself on me, Hannibal?" Du Maurier hisses and her words strike him like spit.

"I would take nothing from you that you were not willing to give, my dear. If we are truly partners…"

Hannibal releases her hair, lets it tumble across her shoulders and sweat soaked back. She drops her gaze to rest on the thatch of curly black hair and erect cock that curves from his body, pendulous pouch below. Hannibal is magnificent in his debauchery. Positively shameless.

"…then reciprocity is the expectation, don't you think?"

He stokes his cock for good measure. She stares up at him, poised to spring, her body as tense as Hannibal has ever seen it as she inches away from him toward the headboard, and the night stand. She opens her mouth, not to speak, but to distract.

Hannibal is not distracted. Before a retort can pass through red lips or she can creep another inch along the crimson colored sheets, Hannibal has closed the small space of mattress between them. He squeezes the flesh of her shoulder with one hand and with the other grasps the fleshy hip that rises from the mattress too late. She struggles to reach the night stand. Thoughts of grabbing the knife hidden there fills her mind, as do thoughts of sinking the blade to its polished stone hilt into Hannibal's chest. She would find a way out of Florence, out of Italy and never look back…

Hannibal practically hurls Du Maurier into the mattress.

Du Maurier finds herself on her stomach, Hannibal's hands heavy upon her back pressing her into the mattress again. She feels a hand on her head and her face is thrust into a pillow as his other hands works its way between her tightly clenched legs.

Hannibal watches Du Maurier's ass wriggle upon the satin, her creamy white skin deliciously pale against the crimson sea beneath her. As he slides his fingers back and forth, opening the moist and swollen lips between her legs, he begins to reach for the drawer of the night stand where Du Maurier keeps her intimate accoutrements. He pauses, and reaches toward the other side, pulls the drawer open and still pressing Du Maurier's face into the pillow, sees the shiny blade and marbled hilt. He closes the drawer and returns his attention to the first nightstand, finds the lubricant he was looking for and pops the lid with his thumb.

"I'm going to release you, but…you must promise to behave."

Du Maurier's words are lost into the pillow, but Hannibal thinks by the way she twists beneath him that she did not offer him any promise. He thinks perhaps Du Maurier is not very good at this game and requires a little guidance to see her way to cooperating. There are rules to be observed.

"If you would be a swan, then let me see the swan, know the swan. My bed has room for only one other, Bedelia."

Hannibal slaps one white cheek leaving the mark of his entire hand upon it. Du Maurier cries into the pillow, hands come up and rake at Hannibal's arms. He swats her again, even less kindly this time. He lets her wrest herself from the pillow, knowing that her every breath had been fought for.

Du Maurier turns from the pillows to face Hannibal, cheeks flushed and hair damp against her head, beads of perspiration glisten all over her. Hannibal thinks this is what sex should look like between them.

"Your bed…is your affair, Hannibal. This…is mine."

Du Maurier springs and Hannibal is knocked off balance as Du Maurier throws her full weight upon him. He recovers quickly, quickly enough to grasp at legs flung across the bed as Du

Maurier's upper body stretches and twists towards the night stand. Hannibal pulls on the dainty pale legs, fingers sinking into calves and he pulls her across the sheets.

Heat courses through Du Maurier as nipples rub against satin, the friction causing her to cry out as her fingers too rake across the rumpled sheets. Hannibal shifts, pulls her around by a wrist on the slippery satin so he can open the drawer for her.

He lets go of her wrist as he reaches inside the drawer. He removes the knife and flashes the blade before Du Maurier's wide blue eyes.

"Was this for me?" he asks, gently without even a hint of reproach.

Du Maurier swallows and looks to the bed, thinks her blood would be the same color as the sheets…

"Bedelia? Was this for me?"

Du Maurier resigns herself to the new game Hannibal has foisted upon her. She will survive this… whatever it is. And her resolve will be all the stronger.

Du Maurier lifts her head and her eyes narrow as she speaks. "Yes, Hannibal, it was, is…for you."

Hannibal holds the knife horizontally out in front of him, caresses the blade and touches the point to his finger.

"And what would you have me do with it?"

"I would have you rip Graham's heart out with it. I would take back what is mine." Du Maurier says without hesitation.

Hannibal raises a brow. Her response was unexpected. And strangely…arousing. He sets the knife on top of the polished wood, lifts his eyes to Du Maurier. She kneels upon the bed, beaten for the moment at her own game, but refusing to surrender to Hannibal, or to her fear just yet. Hannibal is impressed.

Du Maurier plays to win. Hannibal will grant her the opportunity to try. And to the winner go the spoils. If Du Maurier has aspirations to his bed, believes herself the superior predator, Hannibal will send her to Will. Let her match wits with his fledgling face to face rather than pull her strings from the sidelines. The ultimate test for Will. Problem solving for Hannibal.

"Then, let the game truly begin." Hannibal says, taking a breast in hand to caress the hardened nub of nipple.

Du Maurier shudders, looks up at Hannibal and lifts her chin. Hannibal smiles down at her. The defiance will turn to whimpering soon enough.

"My…appetites have been long unsated, my dear. I hope you are up to it. On your knees, bottom up…high, very high."

Du Maurier bends back to twist along the sheets. She stretches turning to her stomach and crouches as Hannibal had…commanded. She raises her ass to Hannibal as he moves to kneel behind her. The touch of his hand slick and warm upon a tender cheek causes her to flinch.

“Up, my dear. Like this…”

Du Maurier is positioned so that she is exposed from tail to front and she feels the gloss of lube smear between clit and labia, faster, deeper and the roughness hurts and excites. Du Maurier whines into the mattress, soft whimpers that grow more guttural with every swipe of Hannibal’s fingers between her legs.

The pleasure ripples, soars, and she wriggles with every touch, the air tickling her skin, driving her mad. She can feel her clit pulsing she is so close.

Hannibal removes his hand and she turns her head to see him applying more lube. She waits, hips undulating, leg muscles tense as the throbbing between her legs intensifies in anticipation. She feels a sticky hand alight again upon the curve of her ass and her eyes widen in surprise as he sinks a slippery finger between her cheeks pushing puckered flesh apart.

Hannibal thinks Du Maurier should experience him in every way possible. He demands nothing less from Will. He has given her the choice she denied Clayton, and provided a lesson in control and obedience long overdue. He watches Du Maurier sink her teeth into her pillow as he sinks another finger into warm waiting flesh, and another…

Daniel throws the front door open and sinks to his knees to greet Cara and Bella while Will takes care of the cab at the foot of the drive. He has never felt as exhausted as he does now, but he pushes himself off the porch and allows the dogs to roam the yard in search of that perfect spot to relieve themselves. He watches Will amble up the drive as the taxi rolls down the road, unbuttoning his shirt as he walks.

“I feel like I’ve been in a boxing match, and lost.” Will says rubbing his face, then running fingers through his hair to massage his scalp. “You must be ready to crash and burn, too.”

“What an education. I am…so tired I can’t think. Crawford is relentless.”

“Yeah, he’s um…pretty intense.” Will agrees. “I’m gonna grab something to eat and crawl in bed.”

“Uh…not sure what’s in the fridge, Will.” Daniel says, biting at his lip.

“Oh…well, I’ll fix us something. Got milk?”

“Last I looked.”

Will runs a quick inventory from this morning. The day has been so long, this morning feels like yesterday. He doesn’t want anything heavy, just enough so his stomach doesn’t growl during the night.

“Cereal, milk, and bananas.” Will pronounces.

“Sounds great. Go ahead, I’ll finish up with the girls.”

“Then, I’ll take dibs on the shower.”

“Better hurry…”

As Daniel rinses the dishes in the sink, he turns to Will, still perusing his emails at Daniel's laptop. Daniel had put on some music earlier, a playlist of assorted classical pieces he likes to relax to. And Daniel does need to relax after today. After the last couple days. He thinks about taking down the hookah, but pot sometimes keeps him awake and he does not want to lie in bed with thoughts racing around, certainly not the thoughts he's been struggling with all day.

He decides to take some over the counter P.M. medication and call it a night. There is plenty for the two of them to discuss, but that can wait until morning. He doubts Will is up for it either. He does have to discuss sleeping arrangements with Will, however.

"You going to be up for a while?" Daniel asks as he dries his hands on the dish towel behind Will.

Will looks up from the computer screen, "No, not much longer. My eyes are stinging as it is. Going to bed?"

"Yeah. Um…Can you sleep in the guest room tonight?"

"Sure…something wrong?" Will says.

"I need a break. If you sleep next to me…"

"You won't sleep. I understand." Will says, hoping that is the only reason, resigning himself to the possibility it is not.

"Good." Daniel says, wringing the dishrag around his fingers. "Goodnight then."

Daniel starts toward the stairs, thinks better of it, turns back around, and flicks Will's ear instead. "Get some sleep yourself. C'mon Cara…bedtime."

Will watches him take the stairs two at a time, Cara in tow. He smiles, relieved and grateful for Daniel's reassuring gesture. Will doesn't sit long at the laptop. He shuts it down after he hears the water shut off upstairs, allowing Daniel to have the bathroom to himself.

Although Will's eyes burn for sleep, his mind is restless with the images and impressions that assaulted his mind all day, and he feels tossed about on a choppy sea. He walks up the steps in a daze, brushes his teeth, splashes water on his face and retires to the guestroom, leaving the door open.

Images of the tableaux, of Jack, of Pazzi whir around his head, associations flicker and spark as cascades of conversation tumble through his conscious mind and he stares into the dark wide eyed. Thoughts of Hannibal seep into every image and he hears the fluttering of wings in the darkness as his mind drifts upon its restless sea.

He feels a tugging on the sheets behind him and turns to find the tow headed Hannibal from the orphanage on the pillow beside him. He squeezes Will's hand beneath the blankets, a silent invitation to again observe. The child turns in the bed, pulling the course blanket that covers his slender form around his neck. Will shivers beneath the blankets, the room is so chilly.

Will watches as the room brightens a little, though it is night. A single wall sconce burns casting an eerie glow about the room Will has seen in his dreams. Hannibal edges closer to the other side of the bed where another child sleeps. Will raises his head for a better look. The other beds are all occupied, all but one. The dark haired boy sleeping at Hannibal's side should be in the empty bed, but he is nestled snugly beside Hannibal, who cuddles close to him as much for warmth as for comfort.

Hannibal has found a friend in the orphanage of Will's dreams. Will's eyelids become heavy as he watches the boys sleep, and he has almost drifted into a peaceful state that approaches certain blissful slumber when light crashes around him. A lantern hangs suspended in his face and Will squints in the brightness until his eyes adjust.

Hannibal is sitting up in the little bed, arms as slender as twigs at his sides, fingers balled into fists as the boy with dark curls is ripped from the mattress, blue eyes wide with alarm, arms and legs flailing against the body of the headmaster who carts him out of the room past the beds of the other boys. The door slams behind them, the sound of the lock clicks loudly on the other side. Hannibal throws himself on the mattress face down, fists flying into his pillow, and Will hears his muffled cries as darkness fills the room once again.

After a moment, Hannibal edges over to Will, eyes closed, lips parted and his hands reach for Will in the little bed. Will feels the warmth from his body as surely as he feels his own. He places an arm, tentatively at first, over the blonde haired little boy and the child that is Hannibal turns to his side so his back is nestled into Will's chest, bony shoulders lodged beneath Will's arm. The last thing Will remembers is the sound of the boy's breathing in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

The scene with Hannibal and Bedelia is about the manipulation and mind games between them. The next chapter reveals what actually happened.

Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

The morning after with Hannibal and Bedelia and…the morning after the murder tableaux with Daniel and Will.

“And if Will were to embrace his nature, would you welcome him with a similar embrace?”

“That…presents an entirely different challenge.”

“Your preoccupation with Clayton betrays your…interest. I think you find the challenge intriguing, if not…desirable.”

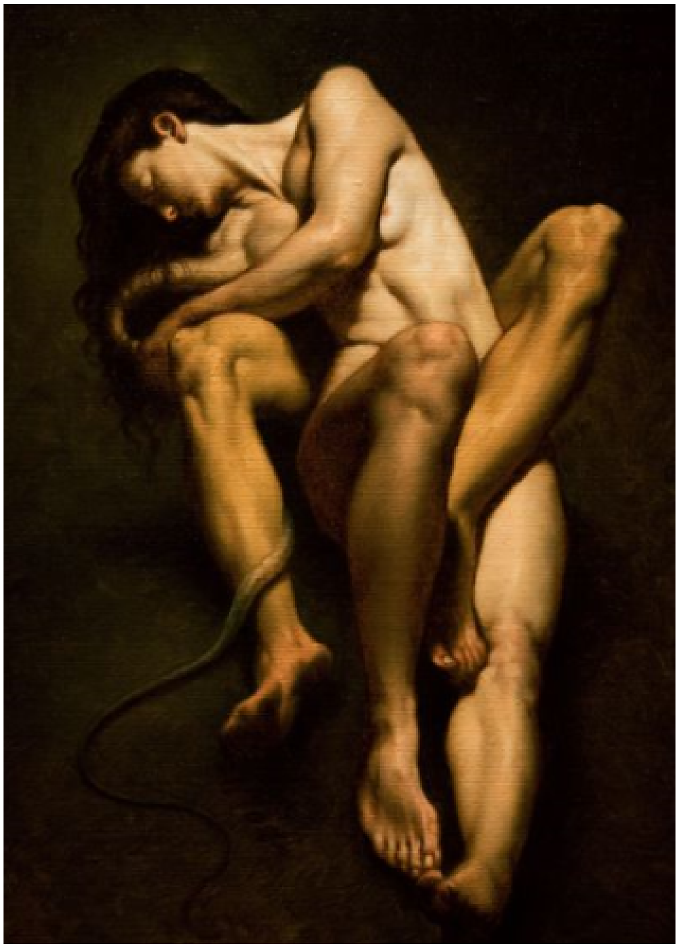
“You would share your precious Graham?”

“I would leave that…to the two of you.”

Du Maurier rises from her chair and begins to collect the remains of their breakfast, her thoughts in free fall and aware Hannibal watches her closely though he pretends otherwise.

Chapter 65

The morning after with Hannibal and Bedelia and…the morning after the murder tableaux with Daniel and Will.



La Nascita di Donna - The Birth of Woman, Roberto Ferri

Through every city shall he hunt her down, Until he shall have driven her back to Hell, There from whence envy first did let her loose.

Dante's *Inferno*, Canto I

Hannibal pokes another grape, and takes the red pearl of fruit, lustrous and wet from the polished tines into his mouth and smiles with the sweetness that explodes on his tongue. He sits in the breakfast nook, a tastefully decorated corner of Du Maurier's bright kitchen, also tastefully decorated with a minimalism that strikes Hannibal as almost Spartan. Except for the baskets of hanging flowers, glorious cascades of pink and purple petals, Du Maurier's kitchen is the epitome of elegance in gradients of gray.

He notices his cup is nearly empty and, since Du Maurier is on her way back to her chair with a fresh pot, he holds it out for her to refill it. He tilts his head a little in acknowledgement and to inhale the delicate floral fragrance she had splashed over her neck and between her breasts as Hannibal had stepped out of the shower behind her.

Du Maurier is unassuming this morning as she pours more of the steaming roasted coffee into his cup, ruffling his hair as she circles the table in her Pordenone snake print robe and bare feet. She slides into her seat with her usual composure, the silk riding up her thigh and there is something wild about the viper this morning that Hannibal finds fascinating. It is perhaps the way her hair tumbles in damp ringlets, fresh from the shower to hang unadorned about her shoulders. It may be that her fangs are at last beginning to show and the scales have at last broken through Du Maurier's tight suit. Du Maurier is a fascinating creature. All the more so now that Hannibal has a better idea of her mind.

It had been necessary to jolt Du Maurier out of her complacency. If one learns her limitations too soon, she never learns her power…and neither would Hannibal. Hannibal now knows what she is capable of out of a controlled environment. He has done it before, but that was years ago. Hannibal has shaken her out of her comfort zone in her own home. He also knows of what she is not.

The tableaux have similarly shaken her chess board, causing the pieces to shift. After last night, Hannibal is certain she will remain in Florence. He exposed not only the knife, but her weaknesses and fears. She will have to make her move against Hannibal soon and be successful to take her leave of him. She believes she has Hannibal's code to their Swiss account. Even that were true, Hannibal has made it impossible for her to claim it.

Her agenda is again a matter of arithmetic. She must now balance the equation in order to leave Florence. The best way to accomplish her objective is to simplify her equation by canceling out the common factors that work against her, reducing the problem to its simplest form. The answer to any of Du Maurier's reductive equations is always one.

I would have you rip Graham's heart out with it. I would take back what is mine.

Usually more circumspect but emotionally compromised, Du Maurier had unwittingly revealed her math as she had looked up at Hannibal from the bed last night. It is her intention to remove both Hannibal and Will. She would have Hannibal destroy the thing he loves, not to take Hannibal back, but to take back the only thing Du Maurier wants: the Swiss account. Du Maurier leaves little doubt as to her plans for the unfortunate Clayton despite her dalliances. It is possible she intends to frame either Hannibal or Will for his murder. Whatever she has planned, the survivor over the ensuing mayhem, either Hannibal or Will, will be surrounded by the FBI. Perhaps Du Maurier believes she can manipulate either Clayton or Will. Manufactured insight to determine Hannibal's next move.

Du Maurier has stood by and watched many patients destroy the thing they loved believing it the only choice they had. Hannibal suspects she engages in something similar with her patient in Fiesole. How fortunate for that patient that Clayton and his canine therapy had been introduced; brief reprieve though it is. Du Maurier does not treat Lydia; she treats the parents. Would she remain in Florence, Hannibal has no doubt that Du Maurier would own the estate after the distraught parents had buried their children and Du Maurier had buried them. Du Maurier is ruthless in her efficiency, and single minded in her pursuits.

Hannibal has set quite the table for Will. Dispensing with the Trojans and Greeks are merely appetizers in what is sure to be a sumptuous feast.

In the meantime, Du Maurier's appetite remains unsated.

She had played along with Hannibal's submissive game until she had felt the tip of Hannibal's cock nudging insistently and the gears in her mind had shifted, slammed into reverse, and come to a full stop. Her hair had hung down her back in a tangle of wet gold as she had turned her head, her body beautifully splayed beneath Hannibal.

You may take Hannibal but I am…not prepared to give on this…

No longer curious?

No longer interested in playing the goose for you.

You…are not the goose, my dear, nor would I mistake you for him. But, neither are you a swan…not yet.

Hubris, Hannibal, invites the wrath of the gods.

As I said, you are no swan… Still, courtesy is the cornerstone of civilization. What courtesy would you bestow instead?

Du Maurier had drawn her knees gracefully beneath her and had risen from the sea of red to raise her arms over her head. Her flawless back to Hannibal, posing her legs to one side, she had gathered up her hair from her neck and shoulders and turned her head to Hannibal in profile, assuming the pose of an Odalisque ethereal in her loveliness. And Hannibal had thought how fine she was, and how utterly perfect that the viper in his garden assume the shape of Eve. She will become as blood and breath to fuel his Adam's radiance, and try as she may to tempt his fall; he will walk in the garden again.

Du Maurier had spent a considerable length of time crouching on all fours with her lips wrapped around Hannibal's cock, bestowing tender courtesies and even swallowing afterward. Hannibal stirs a little cream into his coffee, touches his lips to the coffee mug, and finding the temperature acceptable, drinks and smacks his lips. He lifts his eyes to find Du Maurier's appraising sapphire eyes stare from across the table. Hannibal offers a gracious smile before taking another helping of fresh fruit.

Du Maurier's need to control every situation diminished her enjoyment of what could have been a sensuously satisfying evening Hannibal thinks. He had introduced chaos into their bed last night and Du Maurier had quickly tried to correct for it, her only spontaneous act to reach for the dagger in her nightstand drawer. Still too vain to learn from Hannibal. Du Maurier restrains her desires because they are weak enough to be restrained.

Keeping such a decorous dagger in her nightstand is appallingly trite. She clearly keeps weapons all over the house, and Hannibal would expect nothing less. She had gone for the nightstand on impulse, knowing that wielding a knife against Hannibal, awake, would be folly. Her emotions had gotten the better of her last night. She is likely reassessing her impulses from many angles this morning.

Du Maurier has correctly identified Hannibal's obsession with Will but apparently finds no parallel with her blatant materialism. Not that Hannibal intends on going without. Affluence and resources do afford one the liberty and the means to indulge one's appetites accordingly.

Du Maurier could have had it all. In her, Hannibal had recognized a kindred spirit and for a time their association had been mutually beneficial. The creature Hannibal had brought out in her had emerged from its cocoon slick and wide-eyed with wonder only to dry quickly, leaving a brittle husk of the promise it once held. It is Hannibal's opinion that Du Maurier withers with envy at the thing she will never become, seethes with resentment for imagined offenses and would take from her creator his most beloved creation of all.

Du Maurier enjoys sex. She enjoys it with Hannibal. But it is not intimate. Du Maurier does not give of herself and neither does she accept such gifts of the flesh in the spirit they are given. She denies herself and blames Hannibal.

Will denies himself, but blames himself. The anger he directs at Hannibal is for his own weakness. A weakness Hannibal had exploited in his creation to aid his becoming. Of course, his creation has discovered and exploited the creator's weakness, inviting a wrath from which he is still recovering. Each of them harbors a weakness for the other, and cannot help but seek advantage over the other and in this; they are alike, just alike.

Du Maurier sits across from him convinced she understands her own nature, and Hannibal's. She presumes to understand Will's. While Du Maurier's psychological acumen is formidable, she fails to recognize her own compulsive tendency to transference. She continues to assume she and Hannibal are more rather than less alike, and from this premise she unconsciously attributes motives and desires to Hannibal that do not exist.

Will does understand Hannibal. He had been frighteningly accurate in his understanding; his empathy had interpreted Hannibal's expressions of violence and intimacy toward him for the manifestations of desire they were. The anal manipulation of Du Maurier had been…exploratory as well as provocative. Hannibal could have taken his pleasure plowing the usual field. Even if he had broken new ground, he cannot imagine Du Maurier permitting him to bathe her afterward; she would have viewed the bathing an extension of the act that had preceded it and deemed it just as demeaning.

When Hannibal had joined her in the shower this morning, arched brows had raised at the intrusion quickly corrected with a sweep of her hand toward the cloth, sponges, and scented soaps on the shelf. No one breaches Du Maurier's personal space unless invited. No one but Hannibal has likely ever dared without suffering consequences. Even so, she has remained a vessel content within her own containment, as far from Hannibal as earth to sun.

It is impossible for her to appreciate the gesture as an act of devotion. As impossible as it is for Hannibal to offer her any such gesture with any degree of genuineness. Only one person has moved Hannibal to bestow his devotion with that sort of delicate intimacy.

Breaching Will's personal space, invited or not, sends shudders of awareness through him, the mere act of touching igniting a series of currents, beautiful and divine. When Will had lost the wrestling match Hannibal had introduced that lost weekend with Tier he had understood the rules and taken his loss as opportunity to gain insight, his empathy and curiosity notwithstanding.

Hannibal had knelt over Will from behind admiring the glistening figure posed on the floor. Will's knees and elbows had been bent and his head inclined toward the floor, muscles tensed in a pose of surrender, elegant and unforgivably beseeching.

Have you done this before?

The wide eyed look Will had given him as he had turned his head to look at Hannibal over his shoulder had been enough of an answer. *Have you?*

On occasion, though it has been quite some time since assuming your position. May I offer some advice?

By all means.

Your impulse will be to resist. Don't. Trust that this initial encounter is intended to encourage others. Your empathy should provide a unique experience…

In the aftermath of his deflowering on the floor of the kitchen, he had accepted the bathing for what it was, had stood with arms outstretched, hands against the tiled wall in the shower as Hannibal had washed them both, empowered and hardly demeaned, and fascinated with the sensations coursing through his body.

Du Maurier is no goose and will never be a swan.

"You look like the cat that swallowed the canary." Hannibal says to the would-be swan, who sips her at her coffee contentedly.

Du Maurier sets down her cup. "I think I spy a few feathers on you, Hannibal."

She stretches her arms out to her sides and shrugs her shoulders to bend her neck to one side, then the other. She eyes Hannibal's now empty plate and shifts in her chair again, her movements languid, very much like a feline stretching in the sun, claws extended.

"You seem restless this morning." Hannibal says, shoving the plate forward so he can rest his elbows on the table to cradle his chin as he gazes at Du Maurier across the short expanse of white and pale pink damask between them that might as well be miles.

"And you…are ravenous." She purrs.

"If you still have an itch, I have time to scratch it."

Hannibal's offer is met with downturned eyes and a twist of lips. "I have to return to Fiesole today. If appearances are to be maintained. I remain…vulnerable to your impulses, Hannibal."

"And I to yours. I have obligations at the Uffizi this week. Two lectures, a luncheon, and a wine tasting I believe."

Du Maurier arches a brow, coffee cup suspended before her mouth. Victor is Clayton's patient. Graham may not know who Victor is, but Clayton does. Du Maurier can say nothing.

"You will continue to wear the suit of Victor Boucher? Do you think that wise?"

"There will be no police presence at the premier museum of Florence. Tourism is sacred business. There is nothing to connect me to the simple assistant curator, one of many in the Vasari Corridor. And I enjoy being there."

Hannibal thinks he will especially enjoy it should Will follow his instincts and make an appearance. If Hannibal had made his intentions any more obvious, he might find Uncle Jack walking the halls of the Uffizi. As it is, he has provided Will, and he supposes Clayton, a trail of breadcrumbs. An arranged meeting would give Will time to prepare mentally, emotionally. Hannibal prefers spontaneity, at least for Will. Until the cub can contrive his own clandestine encounters, he will have to suffer Hannibal's.

"Then you expect to remain in Impruneta?"

"Of course. Best way to keep an eye on the enemy is when they breach the walls."

The only means of finding Hannibal's residence lies with Will. Will has all the information in his head. The Greeks and Trojans will stick to him like glue. Will will eventually find him and Hannibal must be prepared that he may not show up alone. What Will does at that point will be… interesting.

Du Maurier could disclose his location to Jack, but doing so before she can set her plan in motion is unlikely. Once she gives that information to the FBI, she loses control. She certainly would not provide it for Will.

"The FBI are not the only ones looking for you, Hannibal. These Paolini must want to avenge their family, they are Sardinian you said? Not easily given to forget a vendetta once issued."

"Then it is fortunate I have a large table to accommodate all of my guests." Hannibal dabs at his lips with his napkin.

Du Maurier leans back in the chair, to better assess the creature that gazes at her from across the table, wiping at lips as soft as they are cruel. *Whimsy*, she thinks. He is absolutely fearless. Du Maurier wonders what he knows, or thinks he knows, to appear so satisfied, so…sure of himself. She has never seen uncertainty in Hannibal and doubts she would recognize it if she were to ever witness that emotion or any like it steal across that proud face.

She has wondered about the look on Hannibal's face when he had set his blade to his precious Graham. Graham had made a mistake, been caught in some lie. She suspects the crime junkie Freddie Lounds' faked funeral had something to do with it. Hannibal has never revealed exactly what it was, his pride too wounded to admit to Du Maurier she had been correct about Graham and his intentions to manipulate Hannibal. She wonders also what Graham had inferred from the look on Hannibal's face. He has had a year to remunerate. A year to allow his vengeance to fester. She considers Graham may have played a part in the Verger drama. Verger's unfortunate accident occurred not long before Hannibal's escape from Baltimore. She thinks the present situation not coincidental.

She also thinks she may prefer the bored and pining Hannibal to the invigorated and joyful Hannibal seated across from her. His smile is maddeningly malicious. What is he up to? He may simply be pleased with himself for the presents he just bestowed upon the FBI. He may be experiencing the happy anticipation of a reunion with Graham. Whatever it is has him positively swimming in self-congratulation.

Du Maurier stabs a piece of cantaloupe wrapped in prosciutto, savors the salty sweetness and thinks of the celebratory repast she will enjoy in Zurich…

"Perhaps now would be a good time to tell me exactly what the arrangement is between you and Jack Crawford." Hannibal says suddenly.

"I've already told you." Du Maurier's face remains placid though her heart threatens to jump out of her chest.

"You said Agent Crawford had granted you immunity in exchange for your cooperation. You gave him nothing actionable, but since you had already been granted immunity he had to let you go."

"That is the essence of our encounter, yes. Why?"

"You may be correct about Will. It is no secret between us, despite my best efforts to assure you otherwise, that I still have hopes for Will. In order to better know his intentions and those of the FBI, your connection to Jack Crawford may prove advantageous."

"In what way?"

"I need to know what is going on in the investigation. If you played the victim with him successfully once, perhaps you could do so again. We will need more reliable information that that…" Hannibal glances to the mounted tv, tuned to a local morning news program, images of the crime scenes spilling into living rooms all over Italy, "…if we are to leave Florence."

"If I contact Agent Crawford, he will know I have access to you. After a year, that hardly paints me as a convincing victim."

"I think you are capable of painting whatever you would like him to see. What did you tell him?"

"That my intentions were nothing other than to rebuild my life away from you and the FBI."

"I think Agent Crawford could be persuaded to believe that I had once again resurfaced to interfere. That you remain uncompromised as far as I know. That you had provided stability until recently."

"You ask me to put myself at risk for your actions, again. Why, Hannibal? Why make such a spectacle? You could have dispensed with them discreetly."

"This particular intrusion is a personal affront. And while my response was…excessive; it was warranted."

"You wanted to see if Graham would come. This could have remained a local matter, but you brought the FBI upon us."

"You can whine about it, or provide the constructive and intelligent support I know you can. Despite your inclination to stand by and watch, you seem to have developed an eye for interference at least where Will is concerned."

A knowing glance issues and Du Maurier looks aside, brows raised yet again.

"I will consider what you ask Hannibal. I agree that our current situation does require… interference."

Du Maurier has no doubt Hannibal's devious mind has concocted some grand deception and its success hinges upon the misdirection that Hannibal expects Du Maurier to provide. She will have to play along, though Hannibal's request does play right into her own deception. A most fortuitous turn of events.

"I'm curious. If Will has found forgiveness, is willing to forsake the FBI, leave his world behind, would you welcome him into our…enclave?" Hannibal taunts.

Du Maurier shifts in her seat and breathes an exasperated sigh. A much less provocative response than hurling her coffee into his face.

"Why? Why do you persist with this…fantasy? You could have finished him in Baltimore. What other evidence do you require, Hannibal?"

"Will is unique."

"Each of us is unique. His mind fascinates you, but you made a mistake and fortunately detected your mistake. I believe it is your mistake that troubles you."

Du Maurier feels satisfaction warm her as the smile from Hannibal's lips fades.

"I need to know if the mistake lies in its execution, or in my assessment. Had it not been for the Paolini, I would be without the means to engage him. I have been favored with opportunity."

Du Maurier notes Hannibal manages to answer without confirming or denying her assertion. He is infuriating…much like Graham.

"I think *favored* too generous a characterization but you have seized the opportunity nonetheless. Since you are disinclined to let go of this obsession with Graham, I will assist. You have no reservations about me resuming an association with Agent Crawford?"

"Should I? If, as you said, he is suspicious of your motives, clarify them for him. It is in your best interest that I remain…at large, is it not?"

Du Maurier inclines her golden head slightly. "And Graham?"

"If his agenda with Crawford remains as it was before, then your interference will prove that. Your opportunity to be vindicated, my dear."

"You present an irresistible challenge."

"And if Will were to embrace his nature, would you welcome him with a similar embrace?"

"That…presents an entirely different challenge."

"Your preoccupation with Clayton betrays your…interest. I think you find the challenge intriguing, if not…desirable."

"You would share your precious Graham?"

"I would leave that…to the two of you."

Du Maurier rises from her chair and begins to collect the remains of their breakfast, her thoughts in free fall and aware Hannibal watches her closely though he pretends otherwise.

"It would appear we have aligned our goals, and cleared the air this morning." She says leaning down to take Hannibal's cup and saucer, a clear signal that he has been dismissed.

"Yes, the morning has been fruitful, and the day is young."

The road to Impruneta beckons, and Hannibal has preparations to make. For all those dinner guests.

Daniel watches the garbage truck roll down the street in front of his house with immense relief. He doesn't think Will put anything incriminating in his trash, but the removal of the refuse from his property provides some comfort even if the refuse rolling about his head remains.

He had opened his fridge earlier for orange juice, still dazed with sleep, and had slammed the door shut immediately. He had called his office to cancel patients, managing to keep the panic rising inside from spilling into the phone and Maria's ear. Maria had not inquired as to the reason, probably assuming correctly that Daniel's cancellations had something to do with his pet project sleeping upstairs.

Daniel cannot continue to neglect his practice. At this rate, he will be asked to explain himself to his associates in Rome. Another log on the burning pyre that has become his existence. He had looked in on Will earlier. Will had been asleep but the top sheet had been twisted around his legs and the bottom sheet had nearly come off, precariously hugging the edge of the mattress by a fraction, evidence of fitful dreams. He had felt Will's emotional turmoil twisting like blade in his own stomach and had backed out of the room and nearly fled down the steps.

Daniel cannot shake the nightmares from his mind. The nightmares had been so horrifying and surreal that his moans had been loud and unsettling enough to alarm Cara. He had awakened to the swipe of her tongue across his face more than once. Once the sun had shimmered between the slats of the blinds, and his alarm had gone off, he had kicked off the damp sheets and had begun to get ready for work. His first stop after the bathroom had been the kitchen. And then, he had opened the fridge.

He had taken the dogs out, gone for a run hoping to purge his mind. He had returned to start cleaning the walls and windows of the kitchen, where Will had apparently shaken Luciano's blood and tissue from his hands. After staring at the dried red splatter on the window, the dark smudges of Will's fingerprints, and the stained sponge in his hand for several minutes, he had rinsed his hands under the faucet, acutely aware he had been shaking the entire time.

He had felt better outside pulling weeds with the dogs. He had purposely left his phone in the house, turned off. If Crawford had called for Will, Will had either not heard his phone, had ignored it, or had also turned it off. Daniel thinks he simply cannot subject himself to anymore of Agent Crawford today. The thought of spending another day surrounded by cops and FBI causes such a sense of dread he feels nauseous. The cloud of residual emotions he had taken with him from the crime scenes yesterday had hung over him all night and Daniel is aware his dreams were born of those emotions. He feels vulnerable and ravaged. He has not felt anything like this since he had looked out at the ocean from his beach blanket when he was nineteen. He does not want to feel like that again.

As he sits at the edge of his vegetable garden, he thinks himself trapped in an inferno of his own. Exposing himself to Will's dreams and hallucinations has affected his mind. His moral compass has gone berserk. He figures he must be feeling something similar to what Will feels all the time. Even as he reminds himself he took the risks willingly, a part of him wants to scream at Will and shake him senseless for tearing his life apart.

He feels anger. Resentment. He feels…lost.

Will had come to his office knowing damn well what a complete and utter mess he was and he let Daniel try and treat him anyway. His eyes glisten as he thinks what kind of person endears himself to you, insinuates himself into every aspect of your life knowing he is…a psychopath. A killer. Daniel's mouth goes dry.

Daniel invited him. Insisted. Practically begged.

Daniel folds his head into his arms and the sobs rip from him, quietly but his body heaves with every breath he takes.

Will’s hands slide along his exposed stomach as though covered with grease but he knows it is not grease that coats his hands. As he pushes his body along the kitchen floor with his feet, his knees slipping beneath him, his fingers grope at the gaping wound along his stomach. He is trying to reach Abigail who lays on the floor just ahead, the blood spurting from her throat like a fountain.

He feels a tug on his shirt and the fabric peels away from his back as buttons pop underneath. He is vaguely aware of the splattered shoes, then knees of blood stained trousers that appear at his side, of his body being lifted slightly from the floor so one hand can slip inside his ruined shirt.

The strong sure hand reaches around and pries his own blood drenched fingers from the wound he is trying so very desperately to keep closed.

The stream Will. Go…and wade quietly into your stream.

Hannibal? I thought…you were… leaving…

Will’s mind whirls, he can barely move his head, it feels so heavy and yet his thoughts threaten to float away before he can form the words.

I made a promise. And I always keep my promises.

He feels Hannibal’s hand breach the wound, pushing past entrails and organs. The hand reaches upward, turning and twisting behind his ribs until, at last it finds what it is searching for. The hand grasps his heart still stubbornly beating in his chest.

You once asked if I would eat your heart if I killed you.

You said…raw…and bleeding…in…your hands…

Yes. I couldn’t leave without fulfilling my promise. That is what you wanted, isn’t it?

You didn’t kill me…not…yet…

Shall I wait?

The fingers grip the tender muscle that falters in its rhythm and the trousers and the blood fade and go dark before Will’s eyes. Soon, he thinks he will be staring into nothing… He can hear the trickle of the stream in the distance, thinks he might see sunlight just above the trees…

His heart lurches and Will’s fingers wrap around the arm plunged into his wound and he begins to tug, his fingers slide along slippery skin and he tugs more frantically for fear his heart will stop before he can wrestle Hannibal’s arm clear. The more he pulls the larger the cavern of flesh along his stomach becomes and the more tightly Hannibal’s hand squeezes his heart.

The kitchen shifts but nothing tumbles. Will moves but he remains face down on the floor. He tastes the ash of his inferno on his lips, it clings to his mouth and beard and the inferno shifts and shimmers and the pulsing wallpaper with the green leaves and rosebuds flashes before his eyes.

His eyes flutter open and he lands face down upon a mattress as though hurled from the heavens to crash upon solid ground. He moves slowly upon the bed, hand wedged beneath his stomach, flat against the scar, as he looks around. He swallows and begins to breathe again as he recognizes the bed, the guest room.

He pushes up from the mattress, notes the damp and twisted sheets, swings his legs over the side and sits up. He waits until the tremors subside and he is breathing regularly before he stumbles into the bathroom to relieve himself.

He stands over the sink, washes his hands, then face. He stares into the mirror as he towels off and he is relieved to find no black shiny feathers poking out from his tee. He thinks of the dream and his only thought is that Hannibal will have his heart…one way or another.

He dresses quickly, slips his phone into his front pocket, and crosses the hall. He looks into Daniel's bedroom and finding it empty figures Daniel must have gone into work. He realizes that is not the case when he reaches the bottom step and the dogs do not come to greet him.

"Daniel?"

Will walks into the kitchen then back to the living room to stand beside the piano and look out the French doors. He spies Daniel in the backyard, seated among his tomato and pepper plants, a pile of weeds at his back, dogs on either side. He pushes open the doors and steps out onto the patio. The dogs are up and running at Will in seconds.

"Daniel? Decided not to go in today?"

Will sinks his fingers into Bella's fur, strokes her behind the ears while Cara pushes her way between his legs. The sense that something is wrong drops like a stone in his gut. He weaves his way around the dogs to the edge of the patio and steps off to join Daniel in the garden, the fresh scent of the tomato plants fills his nose and he squats down and touches Daniel's shoulder.

Daniel flinches and Will is shocked to realize Daniel recoils from him. Will closes his eyes as his mind invariably sorts through its maze of images and associations. Will chews on his lip and thinks he should have expected this.

The sound of Will's voice sets Daniel's teeth on edge and he wipes at his eyes impatiently, tears still hot on his cheeks. He can't get enough air. He knows what a panic attack is and he knows he is having one right now. The anxiety deepens as he hears Will drawing closer. The touch of Will's hand on his shoulder nearly sends him out of his skin.

"Daniel…"

He can't bring himself to look at Will. His legs feel like they are on fire and he wants to get up and run so badly he can barely contain himself. He feels Will's fingers move in his hair suddenly, massaging his scalp from the top of his head and trailing down to the nape of his neck to begin again. The touch is patient, almost paternal were it not for what has already passed between them, but the affection and the sympathy are clear enough. Daniel's chest tightens and the tears threaten to spill all over again.

Will understands what Daniel is feeling, understands far too well and he bites back the sting of tears in his own eyes. *I tried to tell you…*

“Daniel, come inside.”

Will watches Daniel take a shaky breath, and another. His hand grips Will’s and he squeezes. Will pulls him up from the ground and waits for Daniel to look at him. When he does, the tear stained cheeks cause him to wince.

“I’m…shit…” Daniel’s voice trails off and Will takes him by the arm to guide him into the house before he loses his mind in the backyard.

Back in the house Daniel turns to face Will but words will not come. The emotions swelling again in his chest are too numerous to label, too complicated to express and as he looks into pale blue eyes that seem to mirror the pain he feels, his control breaks releasing the tightness in his chest like a pressure valve.

Daniel’s face crumples before Will’s eyes, and with an anguished gasp the sobs come. Will reaches for his neck, pulls him close and feels Daniel’s hands light upon his shoulders, hesitant and afraid to take the comfort and Will understands the reason for that, too. As he strokes Daniel’s head, thumb to his ear and fingers cradling the soft curls at the back, Will cannot help but find the moment bitterly ironic.

He stands straight as Daniel’s fingers sink into his shoulders as he folds, fighting back the sobs but losing the battle. Will brings his free hand up to stroke along Daniel’s back as he leans into him, shaking with what Will knows is a release of sharp pain and shame for showing it.

“Let it out, Daniel. Let it out before it eats you alive.”

Will continues to hold and pet the sobbing Daniel in his arms. He knows it won’t take long. Will has sobbed like this many times, but alone, rocking on the edge of his bed his arms wrapped around his chest rocking, rocking… There were days when he does not remember how he managed to make himself climb into his car and drive to another crime scene, to Quantico…or to Hannibal’s.

Daniel feels the weight gradually lift from his chest and the pain there eases with every pass of Will’s fingers through his hair, the stroking along his back. He knows that Will empathizes with him, understands completely the meltdown, and the knowing diminishes the embarrassment at losing it in front of him…somewhat. He lifts his head from Will’s damp shoulder and feels his breathing approaching something close to normal.

Daniel lifts his eyes, and blinks in surprise as Will traces his thumb along his cheek. The simple gesture draws a trembling smile. He doesn’t resist as Will turns his face toward him to nuzzle his cheek with his nose, doesn’t resist when Will’s lips graze his own. The fingers in his hair twist around the curls and Daniel presses his lips to Will’s, mouth widening into a full blown smile at the taste of toothpaste mixed with salt. He smiles at how normal the taste makes him feel. Will has grounded him in the moment, provided an anchor for him so he is not swept away in his dark tide.

The gentle nuzzling of lips quickly becomes more impassioned and the kind of comfort Will offers is accepted immediately.

“Upstairs?” Will speaks into his neck.

Daniel shimmies out of his shorts while Will closes the door leaving the dogs in the hall. Will is out of his tee and shorts in no time and Daniel has barely dropped his shirt to the floor when he feels warm fingers reach between his legs, warm lips tugging again at his mouth.

Daniel tumbles into the bed, Will on top of him, hips already grinding into his, teeth already at his neck, and a hand clenched tightly around his cock. Daniel arches his back from the mattress to press against Will, to feel his body hard and solid against his.

He sinks into the pillows as Will pushes his tongue into his mouth, his kisses deeply delivering all the sublime sweetness that he is. Daniel's chest lurches, it aches with compassion as he feels Will drawing the comfort he seeks from Daniel's tongue as he sucks, his need as powerful as Daniel's.

Daniels breaks away after a moment; the emotions between them are so raw.

"What do you want?" Will whispers, dragging lips across his chin.

Daniel thinks of their fishing trip, of the urgency and the harmony of their first encounter. He knows every moment with Will like this may be the last and he wants, craves to recapture something of the Will that Hannibal does not reach, the part that is his.

"I want your mouth." Daniel breathes into the soft curls at his lips, "I want your mouth all over me…I want to come in your mouth."

Will nods, a decidedly wicked grin spreads across his face as he imagines what he is about to do to Daniel. He bends down to kiss Daniel again, and bites into his lower lip.

Daniel grabs Will by the shoulders and pushes him off, just a little.

"No marks. Please…"

"Well, not where anybody can see…"

"Will…I'm serious."

Will rubs at his lips, raises his brows and Daniel pokes him in the ribs. "I'll leave a mark along your throat that will make Crawford look twice…" Daniel says.

"You can try…"

Daniel is flattened against the mattress, Will's mouth is at his throat but no teeth scrape along his skin. Will nuzzles into his jugular, pressing deliciously down his throat, lips massaging the flesh along his collarbone. He licks the perspiration that beads along his sternum to finally nip at his nipples, sending waves of delight. He squirms as his fingers ruffle Will's curls at first, only to twist the silky locks tightly as Will slides his tongue lower.

Will takes his time, enjoying the touching, the intimacy between them. Daniel's body responds to his every squeeze, every nudge, and every kiss like the finely tuned violin downstairs. Will has only to pluck to cause a shudder. Daniel's nerves are still on edge, and his body vibrates with emotional tension.

As Will moves his hands over Daniel's taut torso, he notes how warm and soft Daniel's skin is, how his entire body is pliant, trusting the predator nipping and licking at his flesh will not hurt him this time. Will does not have to break skin to send Daniel into fits of pleasure. As he lowers his face between Daniel's legs, Daniel raises his hips to meet him, fingers already seeking fabric to twist in anticipation.

Daniel hisses with the sensation of fingers circling his navel, the press of thumbs along his hips as Will's beard grazes his pelvis, then thighs, the hairs tickling his cock that throbs intensely. He clenches the sheets in his fist as wet lips and tongue slide the length of him. His mind clouds as Will's mouth closes around his cock and sucks. He can think of nothing else.

He feels Will's anxious anticipation, feels his pleasure rippling with his own and knows Will's imagination creates something similar for Will. The contentment he derives from this shared intimacy rivals the pleasure coursing through him and fuels the desire and want below.

Fire consumes and heat surges as all control is ripped from Daniel. The inferno in his mind is burned away in the flames that envelop his body. His cock twitches and Will's jaws clamp down to contain the spasms that erupt as he bursts inside, and sobs break from him again with the release, dizzying and sweet.

The sucking brings the maddening tingle of delight that rushes like a waterfall over Will. When Daniel cums, Will's throbbing cock gushes into his hand. He cries out as he lets Daniel's spent cock slip from his mouth, a trail of glistening white upon his lips. He wipes his mouth along his shoulder, face contorted in bliss.

Head still spinning, Daniel lifts off the bed at the cool air that bristles upon his skin and he uncurls his fingers from the fabric he has pulled in bunches from the mattress. Will is bent forward, hopelessly undone. His legs already opened, Daniel allows Will to fold into his chest, face flushed and warm against him, hands still cupping his cock.

Will's phone goes off from inside his shorts. Will glances over the side of the bed, stretches a sticky hand out and pulls the phone delicately from the pocket of fabric that muffles the whine. Daniel watches Will's face wrinkle with annoyance as he checks the caller ID.

"It's Jack…" Will says tossing the phone to the floor as he sits up and stretches his arms over his head.

Daniel wonders if Will would have been as cavalier if the call had been from Hannibal. The twinge of jealousy filters up and Daniel catches it, swallows before it can alight on his lips. Will isn't inviting Hannibal into the bed right now, he is.

Daniel looks at the clock on the dresser. It's already past nine. "Did he call earlier?"

"Don't know. He'll call back."

Will is already distracted, building his forts as associations rush like a river around his head. Daniel tugs at his wrist, pulls him back into bed with him.

"We should talk about yesterday."

Will shrugs, rolls his eyes and turns to his side to face Daniel. "Yes, we should…" Will raises mischievous blue eyes to Daniel as he bends his elbow to cradle his head. "Especially before meeting up with Jack again."

“Will…I don’t want to go in there today. I have appearances to maintain, too. Wind of my frequent absences is going to blow and my associates in Rome are going to start asking questions.”

“And appearances are all they are, aren’t they? Not really a lot of therapy going on is there?”

“Not at my office, no. You know, what set all this off this morning was the fridge…what are you going to do with the bags?”

“I don’t like them in there either, but I need them. They’re evidence.”

“Evidence yes, but for what?’

“Evidence I intend to use as misdirection. I’m holding on to it as insurance. I didn’t know what Hannibal’s tableau was going to be, still waiting for surprises to roll in. Or a gift to the Paolini.”

“A gift? You planning on framing somebody?”

“I’m keeping an open mind.”

“Well, can we freeze them? I mean how long will um…the contents stay fresh like that?”

“Not long. I was thinking maybe pick up a small freezer to keep in the basement?” Will says, teeth invariably sinking into his bottom lip as he waits for Daniel to stop clenching his jaw.

“Christ, Will. The rabbit hole just keeps getting deeper and deeper.”

“Yeah, and with twists and turns we’ll never see coming. Are you still up for it?”

“Still in for my penny, in for my pound of flesh.”

“That…is not funny. I have to go in with Jack today, but you don’t. I’m hoping Alia calls with good news.”

“About…”

“About a visit to the Uffizi. I think Hannibal is associated with it somehow.”

“Why the Uffizi?”

“A lot of the reproductions and prints in his home in Baltimore were from the Uffizi. Hannibal never mentioned being in Florence, omitted the city completely from his compulsive habit of disclosing his travels at every opportunity. The same reason my gut told me he was here. After seeing his tableau, I realized my subconscious had guided my thinking while creating mine. Hannibal does see himself as the poet Dante, as Dante was exiled from his beloved Florence, so Hannibal has been exiled from Baltimore. He sits at the Gates of Hell here.”

“I’m still wondering how he found you. The twins didn’t know where you were. How could he have found you?”

“When I asked how he knew about Lounds, he said the same way he found me.”

“Pretty cryptic. What else did he say…that wasn’t connected or relevant to your conversation about the twins?’

“Before he hung up he made a comment about my cologne, how he would know my scent anywhere.”

“Could he have smelled you someplace?”

“What…and not acted on that immediately? He smelled me in his office one day, made a snide remark about the old cologne I used to wear. Part of the reason I changed cologne when I resumed my therapy, to impress him, to please him.”

Associations come quickly and collide. “Freddie Lounds…”

“What about Lounds?”

“He smelled her on me. Before I went to see Hannibal at his office, I had a visit with Lounds at Quantico where she was being sequestered. She wears that hippie stuff…patchouli…very recognizable. I didn’t get close, but just the air in the room must have settled in my clothes…”

“You think that’s what tipped him off?”

Will’s eyes dart around the room, brows raised and mouth slack, “Oh yeah…she was supposed to be dead. He smelled her and…tried to tell me he knew over dinner. Gave me an out. I didn’t take it.” Will closes his eyes and everything Hannibal said to him in the kitchen makes perfect sense.

I wanted to surprise you. And you…wanted to surprise me…

The betrayal was not that he had lied about Lounds, but that Will had not told him of the lie. Had Will explained his reasons Hannibal would have listened. But, he had not and Hannibal could only infer that Will had meant to deceive him all along, thus throwing every meaningful honest exchange they had ever had away. Will had made a sham of the carefully drawn circle of violence and intimacy they had shared. He had caused Hannibal to doubt him and by extension, himself.

How utterly devastating for a narcissist like Hannibal.

Hannibal had believed. Wants to believe still. He had cut Will deeply for his betrayal, but not so deeply that Hannibal had walked away without hope. Even the pompous narcissism had been trumped, overwritten by loneliness.

We are alone without each other…

Hannibal had known Will was working with Jack and the FBI, had expected even applauded Will’s duplicity. Which is why he has thrust Will into the same situation again. To get it right this time. Or suffer the consequences.

Will knows he is the only person to ever receive a second chance from Hannibal.

Daniel knows it, too. “You get the significance of *Leda and the Swan*, now don’t you?”

“I do. He originally hung that print in the dining room for its provocative carnal associations with the food he was serving, the people he was serving. Hannibal’s cosmic pun. Eating flesh and… really eating flesh. Eating and being eaten. The significance of the mythical metaphor for us resonated, evolved during our association. Identifying with the myth personally did not happen until we met.”

“What do you think his thought process was? I mean, did he just look up one day and say to himself, hey…that’s me and Will?”

Will almost laughs. A part of him thinks that entirely possible. Hannibal on a whim. “Maybe I’ll ask him someday.”

Daniel thinks that entirely possible. “You *are* his Nemesis, literally.”

“Um…apparently. Like you said, Leda becomes Nemesis. Zeus chased her, but she was a goddess not a mortal therefore his equal. She kept changing forms, but Zeus always found her and she would transform herself again and again, until finally she became a goose, and he took the form of a swan and raped her. She gave birth to Helen…of Troy. Set the stage for the Trojan War.”

“Because Nemesis never forgave Zeus, Will. Helen and the Trojan War were born of an act of hubris. One god sinning against another. Zeus loved her, but she was not softened by the love, she succumbed to the violence and the hate, never forgave, and becomes the eternal avenger Nemesis. Her retribution is Helen, who commits an act of hubris leading to the supreme act of hubris…the Trojan War.”

“Another inverted myth in Hannibal’s universe. He understands that I see his gift as…a sin against me. He had hopes that his Nemesis would forgive Zeus this time. Like he had hopes that his Patroclus would storm Troy with Achilles. That painting has come to symbolize, in his mind, that his Nemesis accepts his overtures for what they are.”

“Your empathy…he hopes that with your empathy you can understand and forgive. Forgive the raping of your mind, the manipulation, the conditioning, the…becoming.”

“Forgive the creator.”

“Oh yes, there’s that too. Leave it Hannibal to identify with multiple gods, half gods, and heroes. Will, the violence will go on and on in perpetuity.”

“Unless Nemesis can find it within to forgive. Or I let him kill me, again.”

“Fuck, Will. Are you telling me what I think you’re telling me? I told you I won’t help you martyr yourself.”

“If Nemesis forgives Zeus’s hubris, a different Helen becomes possible. There is no Trojan War, and Achilles and Patroclus can spend their days picking other battles to fight. That’s what he wants.”

“What does that mean?”

“I think you have some idea, Daniel.”

“You think you can tame him, save him?’

“Hannibal will not be saved. I’ve changed him. But my betrayal has changed him, too.” Will sighs, “We’re all changed.”

Daniel hears the words, but Will is feeling much more than he is letting on. He feels it from Will and he feels it within himself.

The human heart does not sustain a steady rhythm all the time. Emotions cause erratic heart beats, those in turn send a signal to the brain, and the brain translates the emotion. The brain and the heart are in constant communication, sending signals to each other all the time. The heart beating in Will's chest has been sending the same messages for a long time, and his brain receives those messages. It is his empathy that hijacks those messages, and his imagination runs wild in an effort to deny the messages.

Will can talk about the hate, but he still cannot bring himself to acknowledge the love. Whatever Will is contemplating he needs to remember that alike does not mean the same.

"I understand your impulses. I've felt them through you, felt your emotions. You've kept those impulses under control all this time, Will. You're not a serial killer like him. It's not…compulsive.

"No, I'm a different kind of killer."

"You could have said that better considering you are lying next to me."

"You already know you are sleeping with an intelligent psychopath."

"And you already know how…irresistible you are."

"Are you attracted to psychopaths?"

"Apparently. It's beyond disturbing really. I can't help myself. But you aren't Hannibal."

"Your intellect tells you one thing but your emotions tell you something else. You want the something else." Will says gazing into green eyes that seem so much a mirror into himself.

"Yes…that's what it feels like to you, doesn't it? Despite everything he's done."

Will massages his lips with his knuckles as he contemplates offering the images their conversation has conjured in his mind. Images that Daniel would easily identify with, and connect to all the emotions he has been feeling from Will, what Will imagines he must be feeling in this bed right now.

"Forget what Hannibal is for a moment. Reduce him in your mind to just a person. Remember your first time with another man. Think about the intimacy of penetration. Your senses already overloaded and then compounded by your imagination, your empathy that compulsively allows you to see and feel what he is feeling at the same time. Now…remember what he is."

"Christ, Will…"

"After the mind blowing sex, he pulls out, panting and shuddering as weak-kneed as you are. You…are lying on the floor, unable to move because you haven't stopped trembling from the insane pleasure you're experiencing. You can't even touch yourself because your nerves are still tingling and you know this because you have to turn to your side to avoid brushing against the cool tiles of the floor, your sensitivity so heightened that any contact would be brutal. You haven't recovered, but you take his hand anyway and he pulls you up from off the floor effortlessly."

Daniel realizes Will is not relating a hypothetical encounter for him. It's easier for him to talk about his actual experience with Hannibal this way. To put Daniel in his mind, so Daniel can see.

“You follow him upstairs, to shower, your thighs and stomach sticky with pink tinged semen and you try not to think about that as you force your muscles to cooperate as you mount the stairs, your entire body registering every step. He turns on the shower, double fixtures facing each other and he lets the water run hot, the room fills with steam. Your mind is still reeling from the sex when he guides you into the shower, picks up a sponge and pours liquid soap onto it that smells like him and he commences to bathe you.

“You stand facing the tiles, hands flat against Italian marble that gleams in between your fingers and you focus on this because you don’t know what else to do. He touches you with a surgeon’s hands, hands guided by his mental map that delineates the placement of every bone, every muscle, organ, and vein in your body. His touch is reverent, indulgent and you feel like the most rarefied and adored person on the planet because you are. To him…you are.

“And I told myself that it was manipulation, conditioning. I recognized too late that his…attentions had been genuine. I didn’t want to see.”

“Genuine or not, Will, you aren’t obligated.”

“This…isn’t about obligation. It’s much more complicated than that.”

“There’s a lot more symbolism in those tableaux than even I can detect, isn’t there?”

“Yes…there is.”

Daniel has no trouble believing Hannibal’s attentions were every bit as genuine as Will thinks they were. He also thinks that Hannibal deliberately infused every act with Will, no matter how menial or mundane, with some sensual or erotic association. There is no simple task or routine Will engages in that does not remind him of Hannibal. Hannibal knows how Will’s mind works so well that he ensured there is nothing Will can do without his imagination remembering and recreating doing it with Hannibal. He has successfully imprinted on Will – irreversibly.

This is what Will truly has to forgive him for.

“You told Crawford that the eyes stuffed in Lucia’s heart was a message of rejection. That she wasn’t fit for the table. You told me it was Hannibal wanting you to see your emotions for what they truly are.”

“And both of those are true.”

“What else does it say?”

“He stuck the heart back up in the rib cage. It’s also where they found the garni of goose feathers and blonde hair. I’m pretty sure he broke off one her ribs, too.”

“What would that mean?”

“God took one of Adam’s ribs to make woman. If Lucia is missing a rib, she becomes Adam, not Eve.”

“That makes it Adam’s heart.”

“Yes. And the eyes are the mirror of the soul.”

“Mirror image. It’s not Adam’s heart in there, it’s…”

“The creator’s. And he’s presenting it to his creation, one more time.”

“He’s waiting for an answer. That’s what the goose feathers refer to. Does Nemesis forgive or not. That’s really the only message in the entire tableau.”

“I think so. The rest is all misdirection. He is alluding to the painting for me, yes, but he did wrap the feathers in blonde hair. Misdirection for Jack; but since it’s with the goose feathers, there’s a message for me, too.”

Daniel knows there is much more to Will’s tableau than he has told him. Dante and Rodin are for Jack. Somehow, he thinks Will’s tableau refers to God and Adam as well, but he can’t quite put his finger on it.

Will’s phone rings again and Will sighs, resigned to answer this time. He gives Daniel a look and Daniel sinks into the pillow, feeling like a teenager keeping secrets from Dad.

“Jack..”

“Tell me you’re on your way.”

“On my way, Jack.”

“Dammit, Will. I didn’t say you could waltz in when you felt like it.”

“Actually, you didn’t say when at all. I was wiped out yesterday. Didn’t sleep well, so I slept in.”

“Forget it. We’re all...tired. The place is set up, mostly. We’ve established times for both the tableaux and Will, it doesn’t seem like he could have done both.”

“Okay…I guess I’ll take a look at what you’ve got when I get there. Did you take the tableaux apart yet?”

“Doing that now since Price and Zeller took enough pictures for an exhibit. They have some ideas about the narrative you should hear. We’re all interested in what is in the center, what we couldn’t see through the glass.”

“Can’t wait.”

“About that officer Hannibal knocked out yesterday…”

“What about him?”

“You said Hannibal was telling you you’re deaf and blind. That he won’t believe anything you say.”

“Yes. Something else you think?”

“You don’t think *Buccieri* had anything to do with it? I mean butcher William seems pretty direct, Will.”

“I’m not going to argue, it is a possibility. I’m hoping that the last name is coincidence and the focus is on the first name. The last name by itself is just a nametag for Hannibal.”

"Well, in any case, watch your back. On another note, I'd like Clayton to join us. He's pretty knowledgeable. His classical education is coming in handy. Is he there?"

"Took the dogs out." Will looks at Daniel and Daniel rolls his eyes, shakes his head. Will nods back.

"He may be a walking encyclopedia but look, Jack, he can't keep coming in there. Yesterday was Sunday, but he has a practice, patients."

"Well, he would be compensated for his time."

Will can't resist. "Same rate as Hannibal?" he says, looking at Daniel, who stares back quizzically.

"Oh, you've got jokes today." Jack says without any humor whatsoever.

Will clears his throat, puts on a straight face. "He has to answer to people in Rome. He shares the practice but runs the Florence office himself. If you want him you'll have to write something he can give to his associates in Rome. Get someone to take his patients for a while. He can't just up and leave."

"I get the picture. I'll have something for him tomorrow. Tell him to get on the phone and start smoothing the way for an indefinite period. I'll need email or fax numbers for him. Tell him he can have the day off."

"Mighty generous, Jack since he isn't employed by you."

"Neither are you. When can you be here?"

"On my way, Jack."

Will sets the phone on the nightstand and turns to Daniel to speak when it rings again. Will snatches it up and begins to talk right away.

"What, Jack…"

"Will?"

"Oh, Alia…hello."

Daniel climbs out of bed and opens the door. The dogs come bounding in to join Will on the bed. Will frowns at Daniel who waves him off and disappears into the bathroom.

"Jack giving you a hard time? Sounds like you're having as much fun with your boss as I am."

"Then, I feel for you."

"Can you get away to the Uffizi, today?"

"Today? That was quick."

"Yeah, well I have a girlfriend who dates one of the security guards there. He said no problem. His shift starts at three. He'll even let us in a side door so we can avoid the main entrance and the crowds."

"That's um…very convenient. You sure it's your friend dating him?"

Soft sniggers sound through the phone and Will can imagine Alia blushing at the tease.

"It's not a favor. I think a couple hundred euros would be nice, for the trouble, eh?"

"That's extortion. A couple hundred for the three of us?"

"Just you two. No charge for the cop."

"See you at three. And Alia…thank you."

"I'll text you where to meet. Ciao, Will."

Will checks the time. It's almost ten. He won't get to the Piazza Repubblica before eleven-thirty if he's lucky. As he thinks how he might disappear from headquarters around three, Daniel walks back in the bedroom, plunks down next to Will on the bed.

"So what's up?"

"You up for the museum today?"

"Alia can get us in today? What time?"

"After three. I'll call. You're uh…feeling better?"

"My coping skills are back on track. An afternoon at the museum doesn't sound so bad. I think I can handle it. What's the deal with Jack?"

"Let me shower and then we'll talk."

"Can I join you?"

"Oh, now you start with the jokes…"

The blare of a car horn blasts outside and Daniel looks out the bedroom window at the taxi parked at the end of his drive. He glances back at Will who is buttoning his shirt, belt still unfastened.

"Take your time. He'll wait."

"I know. I'm just…I don't really like suits."

"Yeah, but they sure like you. Here…"

Daniel takes the tie from Will's hands, loops it around his neck, and can't help but grin as Will looks about the room, anywhere but Daniel's face as he fixes the tie around Will's upturned collar. He knows Will can tie a tie, but he likes fixing Will's tie. And he knows Will likes him to fix his tie.

"Oh…where's my…" Will grabs the green bottle of cologne from the dresser, opens it and pauses, looks at the label. "This is yours…where's mine?"

"Other side. You know, I've put on yours a couple times. Maybe we should wrap a piece of masking tape around…what?" Daniel pauses at the vacant look on Will's face.

"When did you mix them up? What occasion?"

"Let me think…I was late for work. The last time was because of you…fooling around and I splashed on yours and didn't even notice. My patient did."

Will's eyes grow wide. "Which patient?"

"A new one. Only had two visits so far. His name is Victor…*Boucher*."

Daniel sits slowly down on the bed. "You don't think…"

The taxi horn bellows again and Will stalks over to the window, throws up the screen and leans out the bedroom window.

"*Altri dieci minuti per favore"* Will waits for an answer. Daniel can't hear, but Will turns around and shakes his head.

"Says he'll wait but the meter is running." Will leans back out the window and waves at the driver. "*Grazie, grazie."*

He turns back to Daniel, his expression severe as he sits beside Daniel on the bed, "Tell me what happened with this Victor Boucher."

"He started a couple weeks ago. I was late the first time, the day after we talked to Chilton I think, or close. So the second appointment I barely got there in time, no thanks to you."

"We screwed around, I made you late. You didn't shower…"

"No…he was the first appointment of the day. He brought breakfast."

"He brought breakfast? For both of you?" Will says, thinking Daniel is going to lose it all over again if he is right.

"Yeah, some scrambled eggs with onion, peppers, and…" Daniel's eyes practically pop out of his head. He licks his lips and swallows. "…and sausage."

Will closes his eyes, remembering his first meal with Hannibal. Breakfast in Minnesota at the hotel. Protein scramble he had called it. Will places a hand on Daniel's knee as much for reassurance as to steady him.

"And what about the cologne?'

Daniel's eyes look imploringly at Will, but Will shakes his head, and Daniel shoves thoughts of human sausage out of his head. Pushes them far, far away.

"I caused a spill, made him spill his orange juice all over my rug and his shirt and trousers."

Will raises a brow wondering how that went over. He can imagine Daniel kicking himself for his clumsiness and Hannibal being effusively charming about the whole thing, making Daniel feel even worse.

“He…straightened my tie, remarked I’d changed my cologne. Said I’d worn something else the first session.” Daniel looks aside remembering the conversation. “I said I grabbed the wrong bottle. And he said easy enough mistake if you share a bedroom. I was tongue tied at that point.”

“He excels at that. It’s a gift.” Will says. “He did find me the same way he found out about Lounds.”

“Will, was there…people in the…Oh god…”

“Daniel…That was a week ago…I mean…”

Will realizes he is being insensitive. Daniel’s jaw shifts from side to side. He blinks a few times, focuses his thoughts and takes a shaky breath.

“How did he find you? By chance?”

“No…a referral.”

“A referral. From who?”

“Doctor Dumont. She’s the psychiatrist of the patient I have the canine therapy with.”

Will’s mind reels as the connections spin faster than he can explain, even to himself. Words are so…slow. Will thinks in images and the picture his mind has painted is frightening.

“Is she…blonde?”

“Yeah. Very pretty. British.”

“She’s not British, but she is a psychiatrist.”

“Who is she?”

“A friend…of Hannibal’s.”

“I have been talking to a friend of Hannibal’s? He has friends?”

Will almost laughs again. Daniel doesn’t mean to be amusing but still. The entire conversation has been a comedy of errors.

“She was Hannibal’s psychiatrist in Baltimore. We brought her in for questioning. She demanded immunity before she would talk, doctor patient confidentiality and all that. She admitted to killing one of her own patients, in self-defense. Implied Hannibal had something to do with it. She seemed to identify with me, as another traumatized victim of Hannibal’s influence.”

Daniel thinks she seemed to be communicating something similar to him about his roommate. And she had known he was talking about Will. Daniel is thinking he has been surrounded by psychopaths this entire time. The thought fairly stuns in its magnitude.

“How did you meet her?” Will asks, mind still hovering over his conversation with Du Maurier at Quantico.

“She approached me at the pool, weeks ago. Said we had met at a conference. Saw me at the gym here. Admired my ideas about canine therapy. Asked if I would meet with her suicidal patient.” Daniel pauses, “My initial impression of her was unfavorable. She’s odd and kind of hard, cold on the inside.”

“No…she doesn’t gush with warmth that’s for sure. But neither do I.”

“She…manufactures her responses. I didn’t feel any genuineness from her.”

“You slept with her?”

“That…”

The horn blares again and Will stomps to the window again. He fishes in his pocket, pulls out his wallet and waves a euro of decent denomination out the window. The honking stops. He shoves his wallet back in his pocket and resumes his seat beside Daniel.

“That….what?”

“That night is kind of a blur. I got sick, passed out. The sex was brief.”

“You passed out over her place? That night Alia came to dinner.”

“Yeah, when you couldn’t get hold of me. I was…like gone.”

“She drugged you. Probably asked you questions. She must have seen us together somewhere.”

Will stands up, runs his fingers through his hair. “We have been mixed up in whatever is going on between Hannibal and Du Maurier. That’s the name I know her by.”

“There were blonde hairs at the crime scenes…” Daniel says.

“Let’s keep this between us. I want to get Jack’s take on this first. I know things keep happening faster than you can process them and I’m sorry, Daniel. I…can imagine how lost you must feel right now.”

Daniel rubs at his face as he looks up at Will. He has been on a roller coaster since he got up and it shows no sign of slowing down. He needs to pull himself together. He feels Will’s hand grasp his shoulder, tightly, an invitation to draw strength from the bond they share. It occurs to Daniel that Will often seems to shine brightest when things get dark.

“I’ll manage. Call me about the museum. I’ll be ready to catch a cab and meet you. Parking sucks around the Uffizi.”

“Hey, did Victor leave his address by any chance. Any information as a patient?”

“I can check that out. He paid in cash. I doubt any information he gave is real.”

“No…I suppose not. But check anyway. There will at least be a good pun in there.”

Daniel nods from the bed. The stab of regret cuts deeply and the blade is tinged with guilt as Will looks at him. He thinks of the winged Daniel of his dreams and of the pale Daniel eating trout at Hannibal’s dinner table. He has dragged Daniel into his world and he is grateful for his company, but he knows he is destroying him little by little. From the forlorn look on Daniel's face, he knows it, too.

Will meshes his lips, presses them tight. There is no stopping what has already been set in motion. Will leans down on his way out the bedroom door and takes Daniel's face in his hands, and on impulse kisses him deeply on the mouth, tugs on the curly locks sticking up on his head. Before Daniel can speak, Will is out the door and down the stairs.

Daniel watches Will climb in the taxi and wonders if he ever told anyone about his life, if they would believe him. He thinks he would find himself someone's patient, quickly. He turns from the window and mentally prepares to make his calls to his office and to Rome. The idea of joining the FBI team as a consultant does not thrill him, but as Will had pointed out in the shower, he will be an active rather than passive participant. Daniel isn't so sure about the active part. He feels more like the ball being kicked around during the game than one of the players.

Realizing that he has been used by Dumont, or Du Maurier as Will had referred to her consumes his thoughts almost to the distraction of all the other unpleasantness this morning. Before he sees her again, Daniel decides he will do some sleuthing of his own. He has plenty of time until Will calls about the museum.

Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

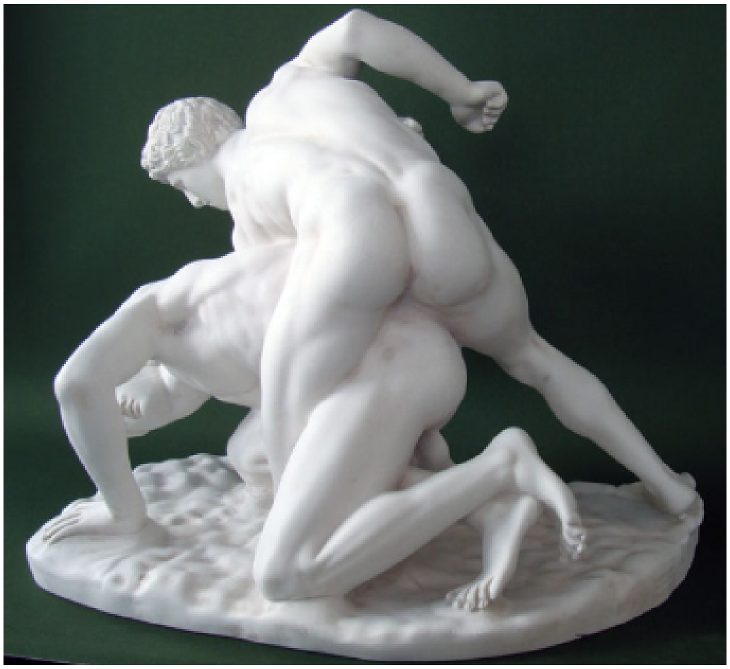
Daniel has some information for Will. Will, Jack, and Pazzi lock horns at FBI Headquarters in Florence. Daniel meets Will and Alia at the Uffizi. Good thing Hannibal is there.

His phone chirps from his pocket and he almost doesn't answer it. Jack is unusually impatient he thinks as he lifts the phone out. His mind freezes and he almost stops walking as he reads Luciano's number across the tiny screen. He presses his thumb to the screen and holds the phone to his ear.

"Hello, Will. Don't turn around. Are you aware you are being followed?"

Chapter 66

Daniel has some information for Will. Will, Jack, and Pazzi lock horns at FBI Headquarters in Florence. Daniel meets Will and Alia at the Uffizi. Good thing Hannibal is there.



Uffizi Wrestlers, courtesy Uffizi Galleries, Florence

After tossing down some diazepam Daniel feels a lot better. Better than he expected if truth be told. He had taken the forgotten vial from his medical bag and tossed down a five milligram tablet, and is considering swallowing another. His emotions no longer steal into his chest like a thief, robbing him of his reason. He can think with the diazepam without having to concentrate on the mere act of breathing because the heart thudding violently in his chest might burst through his ribs.

Taking a vial into FBI Headquarters next time is definitely part of Daniel's defense strategy. He cannot fall apart like he did this morning again. He is supposed to be the stable one, the professional, the person providing the anchor for his patient. Hannibal's presence is no longer restricted to dreams and hallucinations, no longer a speck out on some distant horizon. Will has been trudging through his mind's inferno a ravaged Odysseus returning from the war, meeting up with versions of Hannibal in his various suits and trying them on for size. Now the real thing threatens to topple Will from Charon's skiff like one of Odysseus' sirens, but it is not a siren that swims beside Will's burdened boat; it is a shark.

Daniel shifts around in his swivel chair, senses thick with the sound of creaking leather as his body hugs the smooth surface. He has gone from observer to co-conspirator in a weekend. He has lied to Jack Crawford. Unless he wants to be a walking billboard of guilt, he had better learn to cope with Will's universe and quickly. His anxiety attack carved out his fear from him as though he had taken a blade to bone. Certain realities have slipped into his subconscious to haunt his dreams, a terrible reflection of Will created from the darker recesses of his mind. The hands reaching into his chest to tear his heart loose had not been Hannibal's, but Will's.

…the traumatized are often unaware that they are damaged.

Daniel's fingers curl more tightly around the mouse as he sits at the table. He's not traumatized he tells himself. Will warned him. Will has done his best to shield Daniel from his universe, but it is Daniel himself who insisted on joining him there. He has suffered consequences neither of them could have foreseen. He peels the bandage away from his stomach, flinching as the adhesive clings to his skin to peek at the wound healing beneath the gauze. Images of the blade flashing in Luciano's hands cause him to close his eyes. He *is* damaged and he is aware he is damaged.

Are you attracted to psychopaths?

Awareness does not seem much of a shield. Will had stared into his eyes with a peculiar glint that seems in hindsight to have been less playful and more aligned with the primal sense of satisfaction he had felt from him. A grin erupts as he thinks the satisfaction might have been prompted by the sex. Daniel had responded to Will's dry sense of humor with his own at the time, but now, as he sits poking his toes into the edge of the rug, he questions how benign Will's curious inquiry had really been.

Daniel is experiencing a similar dilemma with Will as Will experiences with Hannibal. He continues to question the source of his feelings. Is he experiencing his emotions or Will's? Are his feelings truly his own? Or has he allowed Will to crawl so far into his head that his feelings are no longer separate from Will's?

Will had been aware he was damaged, too. No one had known better than Will the risks of engaging Lecter when he had resumed his therapy with him with what Daniel now believes the dubious intent to catch him. While Will's empathy has endowed him with an extremely high emotional intelligence, his ability to discern between his own emotions and Hannibal's had been eroded away with the constant intimate encounters like the one Will had described for him. Awareness of why he was engaging Hannibal had made no difference. Whatever resolve Will had had at the time had been swept away in the wake of the emotional tide.

Daniel’s emotional intelligence has been likewise compromised. It had been his decision to take his therapy with Will into the realm of the unorthodox. His toes dig into the carpet. He has to confront this. He expects no less from his patient.

Will had said he had read Hannibal’s attentions as more manipulation, but now realizes that was not entirely true. Daniel leans back in the chair as he considers what Will had likely imagined about Hannibal during their encounters. Dealing with his own emotions and imagining Hannibal’s while crouched on the floor trembling in sensory overload is more than relatable to Daniel, as Will had intended. It occurs to Daniel that Hannibal had orchestrated nearly everything that had happened to Will without considering how he himself would be affected. Hannibal had not intended to fall in love with his patient, either.

Hannibal must be as angry at himself as Will is. Each of them trying to trap the other, and becoming hopelessly trapped themselves. And now Daniel is in the middle of it. It is folly to believe he will emerge from this unscathed. The thought settles like a chunk of ice in his belly despite the pleasant peaceful clouds billowing in his mind.

The difference between an hour ago and now is that he can calmly think about his situation. The stash of opiates in his medical bag includes an assortment of sedatives and anxiety relieving drugs, drugs he had told Will he did not have. When Will had wandered around his house in the dark, unable to sleep the night before their fishing trip, Daniel had forgotten about his stash in his eagerness to take advantage of the opportunity to experiment with the empathic bond between them. He had not wanted Will taking any drugs anyway, preferring to diagnose and work with Will in as natural a state as possible, the idea of the hypnotherapy only a vague idea hanging around his head at the time.

As Daniel’s head now floats with the diazepam, he can almost imagine Will walking around Florence medicated on the same substance. Chilton had written the prescription to treat Will’s generalized anxiety and depression, although after his conversation with Frederick, Daniel believes the preening peacock had chosen to ignore the possibility that long term use of the drug results in disorientation and feelings of paranoia. Daniel thinks it difficult to discern whether Chilton is guilty of his usual incompetence or something darker. Malice can be disguised as ineptitude, and Chilton has some idea of how Will’s empathy works.

Perhaps he retains a tad bit of testiness where Will is concerned. Will had not been the source of sympathy Chilton had expected in his hour of need. Typically, Chilton had failed to entertain that possibility, conveniently forgetting he had been equally eager to exploit Will as he had his former patient, the truncated Gideon. How unfortunate for Chilton that Will had been cognizant of his psychiatric tricks. Being cognizant is not a guarantee of immunity, however.

Daniel rolls the mouse around the pad idly; eventually pausing to cross the little black arrow repeatedly over and over the photo of Du Maurier that appears beside an article published a few years before. He moves the mouse around the pad so he draws circles around the blue eyed blonde staring back at him from the screen. He had thought himself immune from psychiatric tricks, too.

She drugged you. Probably asked you questions.

Daniel stretches his neck slowly from side to side; his head weightless with fog, and clicks the mouse to another page, one without her picture. In a way, Daniel can appreciate Gideon’s revenge on Chilton, venting his anger while using Chilton to try to lure the Ripper out. Gideon had wanted to meet the killer Chilton had force fed him to believe he was through psychic driving. Daniel can understand Will identifying with Abel Gideon. Hannibal has moved all the furniture in Will's head, too.

I know who I am.

Daniel has a very good idea of who Will is. Does Will? Daniel thinks he does. Hannibal definitely does.

Though Will had related the events of Chilton's torment at Hannibal's hands with his usual dry delivery, Daniel has since sensed a sliver of satisfaction simmering behind the somber pools of blue when Chilton's name comes up. Not for the first time, Daniel thinks Will entertains fleeting fantasies of finally finishing off Chilton, if his recent hallucinations are any indication. Frederick may yet find himself flayed and flambéed, the prime ingredient for a quaint Cajun specialty perhaps paired with a pleasant pinot noir.

Daniel massages his fingers into his face and his cheeks sink beneath his fingers, pliant like putty. He thinks perhaps he should not take another diazepam tablet. He sounds like Will.

Daniel can imagine Will's empathy on diazepam. Associations and images would have broken upon him like waves upon a rock, and Will would have been feeling about as much as the rock. He would have been the numbed victim of a flood of unwanted information. Will had locked himself into an emotional gridiron when Daniel had initially met him; a caged predator pacing in his office, distractedly plucking string from his couch. Daniel wants to believe Chilton had been prescribing the low doses to lessen the effects of the constant stimulation Will was receiving, hoping to lessen the anxiety with the reduction of stimuli. But Will's anxiety is not caused by his overloaded senses. If it were only that simple.

Daniel on the other hand, is responding well to the little pills. He had chomped on smaller doses of valium in high school and college in his efforts to cope with the effects of his own gift. The valium had kept his emotions calm even when he was feeling someone else's without meaning to, or wanting to. Once removed from the company of other people, Daniel can regroup. Will cannot. Daniel's mind does not relentlessly recall his associations, unlike Will who repeats, reassesses, and redials in an endless loop.

Even now the thoughts of Victor's or rather Hannibal's sausage lift from the pit of his stomach like a balloon caught in the wind. He hadn't eaten that much of the scrumptious scramble really. And it had *tasted* delicious. The flavor of the subtle seasonings and spice still on his tongue as he and… Hannibal had been talking by the bookcase. Hannibal had been admiring his Greek plates. His plates depicting scenes from the *Iliad*.

Daniel sits up straight at his laptop, the duplicitous Du Maurier and her *curriculum vitae* forgotten. Victor had stood beside him at the bookcase, perusing his shelves with mild interest. His fingers had traced around the Grecian plates and his deep brown eyes had been riveted to the rich red figures etched into black. Until he had said something about the true beginning of the Trojan War and had lifted the deep dark eyes to Daniel's.

Helen had a beginning, too. Every act of creation has its destructive consequence.

Fuck! Daniel recognizes the phrasing. Will's voice echoes in his head but these are Hannibal's words. Daniel's thoughts tumble and he wonders why he hadn't remembered earlier while Will was still here. Daniel knows why. He had been functioning on sensory overload and too upset to recall the details from his sessions with Hannibal. He had been distracted by their discussion of Dumont or Du Maurier or whatever her real name is…

Daniel closes his eyes, allows his mind to shuffle his thoughts around. He remembers the conversation.

I suppose you can look at life that way. A rather polarizing perception.

Polarizing suggests division. Opposites are not always exclusive. Causal relationships need not be either. They can be…complimentary.

Restoring balance…

Had Hannibal known about Will or had Hannibal's wistful tone been the expression of the regret and sadness he had been trailing all over Daniel's office that day? Daniel cannot believe he did not connect Victor to Hannibal. The odd phrasing. The word choice, even the cadence and pauses mimic Will's intonation that subtly shifts whenever he quotes Hannibal. Daniel knows Will is not aware that he does this. He has a habit of mimicking Jack Crawford, too the longer he talks about him. But when Will speaks of Hannibal, repeats things Hannibal said to him, the suggestion of Hannibal hangs over Will like a specter.

Will has said that Hannibal remains in his head, that he often hears Hannibal's voice even when he is thinking his own thoughts. His empathy a double edged sword, especially where Hannibal is concerned, and Will can't help but poke himself with it.

Daniel grabs his phone. If Will is intending to visit the Uffizi today, he should have the benefit of Daniel's input in advance. He dials his office to find out how much information Victor left with his staff.

The crisp pale yellow shirt feels cool against his skin as Will stands with feet slightly apart and arms folded over his chest peering over Zeller's shoulder into the computer screen that flickers with the tabulated results of the crime scene evidence. The table compares the two tableaux in stark inarguable increments of time. Will tugs at his paisley tie and thinks the table pretty accurate as it applies to Luciano and he has no choice but to concede the same goes for Lucia. He and Hannibal had set up their respective tableaux less than an hour apart. Unless Hannibal could transport himself, he could not have erected both tableaux within the narrow time frames indicated by the evidence. Will finds himself challenged to think of an alternative scenario to further misdirect Jack.

But, he doesn't have to.

They have yet to discuss the blonde hair found at both crime scenes. Perhaps Hannibal, in anticipation of the time conundrum, had placed the enticing evidence to be…helpful. Will can imagine Hannibal's focused expression as he had placed the strands of hair with painstaking meticulousness and malicious purpose, his fingers, hands, and body smothered in plastic. He must have been covered in something. Will muses on the possibility of black latex…

"Will?"

Will looks up at Jack, who washes down the last bite of his late morning donut with a slurp of coffee.

“Yes, Jack?”

“Any thoughts to contradict the evidence? Hannibal is not incapable of creating the illusion of a double crime scene.” Jack brushes at the white powdered sugar on the charcoal gray of his sleeve.

“What makes you think he would?” Will asks, raising an inquisitive brow.

The timing of the tableaux did not matter to Will, or to Hannibal he supposes. It only matters to the FBI. Hannibal had only wanted assurances that Will follow through and erect his tableau without seeing his first so that Hannibal could witness Will’s imagination at work, unadulterated and pure.

“The two scenes were set up within a narrow time frame, suggesting they could have been done at the same time, by two people. But the timing is so close; it feels like he wants us to believe two people are responsible. He even leaves incriminating evidence to suggest at least one other person was party to the murders. We found dirt from the slaughter house at the fountain, but no evidence of the fountain scene at the slaughter house. Even if he fabricated the evidence, it speaks to motive.” Jack says.

“And you think he actually did do both. And we’re thinking the motive is to confuse?”

History has taught Jack not to trust any evidence left by Hannibal. Nor should he. Misdirection works best when you know from which direction the gaze is coming from.

“At the very least. He might have figured some way to pull off both and used the radio and the fountain to confuse us. How do you see him pulling off both? If, that is what happened.” Jack rubs at whiskers beneath his chin, side to side like the sway of a pendulum or the sliding of scales as he weighs the implications of the evidence.

“Advance preparation. The cube was prepared ahead of time. Easier to transport. He could have set up Luciano first, driven to Florence to set up Lucia, clearly the more complicated of the tableaux as far as engineering, and then stopped back to the slaughter house to turn on the radio.”

“And I could believe that except…”

“Except that the water pressure from the fountain changed about the same time as the degradation of the radio batteries indicate. Only half an hour’s difference. We are assuming the water pump was activated last and the batteries were fresh.”

“Putting used batteries in the radio doesn’t make sense if he wanted to attract attention.”

“We’re also assuming that’s what the radio was for.”

“Will…what else could it be?”

“A distraction. Misdirection. Maybe the radio has nothing at all to do with when he dropped off his pre-packaged meat. He couldn’t know anyone would be scouring the area for copper with his kids. But he knows how the FBI thinks. Does the time line coincide with decomposition?”

“Still working on that. But let’s say for the sake of argument that both bodies were murdered within minutes of each other. Doesn’t matter. He could have killed them a week apart. He could have arranged one tableau anytime and then followed up with the other. But he seems to have wanted us to find them both, at least the same day.”

“Dramatic either way. We’re still assuming, Jack. He could have dropped Luciano off days before Lucia. All he had to do was drive from Florence to the slaughter house and switch on a radio. If he left dirt from the slaughter house on Lucia, he knows we would have eventually found Luciano. A little more messy…but the Saran wrap would have kept everything in place.”

“Then why find dirt from Luciano’s site at Lucia’s?”

Will shakes his head and a very frustrated Jack continues, “And, he left the utility van in a parking garage. If he drove back to turn on the radio, what did he drive back to the slaughter house?”

“He could have driven it to the slaughter house and then back to the parking garage and left another vehicle there. Did we find tire tracks? How about tracks left by a dolly in the pit? Doubtful he carried Luciano far. The weight of the meat and the glass…”

“No tracks. The entire area had been swept with a broom or brush. Outside, too. Very thorough. No tire tracks in the dirt. And he had to have driven off the asphalt up to the entrance unless he wheeled the cube in there from the road. Everything was swept away.”

Jack rubs his forehead and already he feels the slick of oil on his fingers. He thinks about cranking up the air conditioning. They are on the fourth floor and heat rises. All kinds of heat.

“Jack, it’s possible he had someone he trusted to deposit the ready-made Luciano for him while he delivered Lucia. Or, turn on the radio. According to the time table here, there was maybe half an hour discrepancy. That is almost enough time to drive between the Mercato Nuovo and the slaughter house around four in the morning. No traffic. No witnesses.”

“And apparently no cops. He’d have to drive pretty fast. So it’s possible, but barely possible. What is it he is trying to convince us of?”

What are you trying to convince yourself of, Jack? “I don’t know that he’s trying to convince us of anything. The tableaux weren’t created simultaneously and neither were they deposited simultaneously.”

Will pauses. Jack is gazing at him, silently assessing Will, and everything Will says. Jack is testy already and Will doesn’t know how many more curve balls he can throw at Jack this morning and still get him to swing. He decides to pitch.

“And…neither are twins born simultaneously.”

“Price!” Jack bellows so his voice bounces off the walls, “Come out here a minute!”

Price’s head appears at the door jamb of the adjacent room, “You called?”

“Check on the birth records of the twins. See which one was born first and the times of delivery.”

“Ah…okay, Jack.” Price looks from Jack to Will and back to Jack again before disappearing.

“What would be the significance if there was a correlation?” Jack asks.

“Have to see the hours of their birth, but day and night are divided into twelve hours each, four divisions of three. The number three is divine of course symbolizing the trinity. If Hannibal had the information he might amuse himself by linking the time of their births and deaths to the *Vita Nuova*.”

"Another Dante reference?"

Will is reaching here, but the exercise, no matter how futile, will keep the crime lab busy and keep the ambiguity alive. He knows Dante's *Vita* is one of Hannibal's favorites. Will had awakened one morning to find Hannibal reading from it, head and shoulders propped against his pillow, his face serene as the morning sun had alighted upon the bed. He had glanced sideways at Will, the mirth in his eyes obvious and unapologetic as Will had shimmied closer to peek over his forearms to see what he had been reading, in Italian no less.

You're reading Dante at…seven in the morning?

Inspiration is a fickle mistress. His Vita Nuova, first sonnet, do you know it?

Will had nodded that knew it and had slipped back into the pillow, head against Hannibal's elbow. He had received a nudge for edging too close, and a raised brow for nudging closer still. Hannibal had softly quoted for him, his voice throaty, their conversation the first words he had spoken that morning.

Poi la svegliava, e d'esto core ardendo, lei paventosa umilmente pascea.

And then Hannibal had translated, lifting his eyes from the page to alight warmly on Will as warmly as the sunlight streaming through the window had caught the golden hairs along his arms.

But he awakened her, and of my heart, aflame, he humbly made her, fearful, taste.

Read some more…in Italian.

"Will?"

"Well, he did leave the hearts. Dante watches his lover Beatrice eat his heart from the hand of Love, personified in human form. We're trying to figure out why he left the hearts, aren't we?" Will says, teeth tugging on his lower lip.

"So you're saying he did leave love letters now?"

"I'm not *saying* anything definitively. The eating of her lover's heart foreshadows her death. The hearts may have multiple meanings. And serve multiple functions."

"Wasting our time and resources it sounds like."

"He knows you have to follow leads just in case there is something there. He did place a bouquet garni next to her heart in the rib cage, didn't he?" Will says, as he drops yet another dead end lead into Jack's waiting lap.

"Yes, he did. And he took off a rib, too, even sanded out the rough edges to let us know it wasn't accidental. He's taking trophies, now?"

"Which rib?" Will manages without smiling. This is getting ridiculous, even for him.

"Ugh…" Jack pauses, rubs at his forehead. "Let's just hold off on that. Why all the references to Dante? The Ripper didn't reference literature."

"This isn't the Ripper, Jack. This is a different animal entirely."

Jack eyes light up with a flicker of insight, or so he believes. Will waits.

"You don't know who he is now, either. He's turned the page, so you can't reread it. If he took on a new identity here, you think he changed his persona and his pathology changed, too?"

"The underlying reasons for his pathology haven't changed, but his expression has. He has soaked up Florentine culture. It is within his pathology to show off. Another opportunity to demonstrate how smart he is."

"Yeah, well the word pathology is derived from Greek. The study of suffering. What's he suffering from this time, Will?"

Will does not miss the pointed and accusing gleam in Jack's large eyes. There is an element of truth in the accusation. Jack has simplified the truth, but Hannibal had lashed out in anger. Anger is a natural response to hurt feelings. And Hannibal does have feelings. Epic feelings expressed in equally epic terms.

"That's a long list, Jack. A list both of us are on and probably at the top. Maybe those blonde hairs are a clue?" Will inclines his head and considers Jack carefully and notices the hint of a tic adorn the crease of Jack's eye before Jack adjusts for it. "What did you and Du Maurier talk about before you let her go?"

Jack clears his throat, throws Will a knowing glance before looking aside. "She implied that Hannibal was playing us, that he was probably on to us, and to you. She seemed to have some familiarity with what Hannibal had put you through. You think Hannibal influenced her to kill her own patient?"

"Possibly. He sent Tier to kill me. He is a curious creature, given to whimsy as she said."

Will is certain Du Maurier and Jack had themselves a very interesting conversation. One he will never know. Whatever she had said had fed Jack's doubts about him and Jack had swallowed enough to decide to go to dinner at Hannibal's without backup, and without calling Will. Images of that night begin to roll into his awareness like clouds on the horizon and Will blinks himself back to Jack's temporary office suite.

"Did she give any indication of where she intended on going? When did you cut her loose?"

"I had nothing to hold her on and she knew it. I let her leave before I went home. Walked her to a taxi."

I would like to be free of all of you. My entire life has been uprooted.

Jack recalls the rest of his conversation with Du Maurier…

I'm letting you go with the understanding…

And the written agreement…

Will is…in a bad place right now, and I put him there. I have to keep an eye on him. Will is my friend.

Will Graham is not your friend… Agent Crawford, Will Graham is a ticking time bomb and Hannibal has already lit the fuse.

Is Will aware of the fuse?

I suspect Mr. Graham has been very aware…all along.

…and quickly edits it for Will.…"She suggested she wanted a clean slate." Jack says quietly.

"Jack…" Will traces his fingers along the back of one of the office chairs, "I think she said a little more than that. The blonde hairs in the tableaux…She has either hooked up with him, or he with her."

Jack sighs and stares at Will. Will stands behind a chair facing him, blue eyes trained on his face, his lips drawn in a thin line and waiting for Jack's response. The pale blue eyes look imploringly into his own, as though wounded by the unspoken thoughts needling Jack. Jack decides to disclose *some* information to Will, but the deal he has with Du Maurier is not on the table, not yet.

Jack has two avenues to Hannibal and neither of them...ideal. Du Maurier has yet to contact him. If she does, Jack may bring Will into his confidence. If she does not, Jack may have to assume that they will be looking at another crime scene very soon. The Ripper had killed in sounders of three Will had said, referring to pigs. But if Hannibal is no longer the Ripper, would he break with his pattern? Jack also wonders if Hannibal has actually killed two pigs already. Another break from his pattern to share. But, he had shared with Will before. Jack tucks that thought away in the overflowing trunk of trepidation already stuffed with other thoughts of Will.

"There were unconfirmed sightings of a blonde with unconfirmed sightings of Hannibal at De Gaulle. No camera footage, but airline attendants and passengers claim to have seen them, or people that looked like them. Impossible to tell which flight they took"

"So they were spotted at the terminal but not on a plane?" Will should be surprised Jack has not mentioned this before now, but he isn't.

"Right. But the flight manifests list only names, not pictures. Consensus is that they used another couple's real names as their aliases. The names showed up on no less than three different flights and the real couple claimed no knowledge of passport fraud. Pretty smart. We can't even be certain they boarded any plane."

Will can imagine the tedious job of matching every name on every flight that day to the actual people and then contact them for questioning. If Hannibal and Du Maurier appeared similar enough to the couple, a passport photo would have passed scrutiny at the boarding gate. The idea that Du Maurier has been conspiring with Hannibal for a very long time is not only possible, but probable.

You were Dr. Lecter's psychiatrist, he wasn't yours.

I told myself that, but I was under Hannibal's influence. And what he did to you made that abundantly clear.

What is also abundantly clear is that Hannibal has not always limited his influence to his patients. Will wonders how much Hannibal has shared with her about him. Enough to surmise a similar victimization, but Will finds himself questioning that dynamic. She was never his patient. He could characterize her comments to him at BSHCI and at FBI Headquarters as revealing and helpful, but barely so. Will thinks she whispers into cocoons very much like Hannibal. Hannibal's reaction at learning she had talked to Will at BSHCI had been…reserved.

Your psychiatrist came to visit me at the hospital before my trial. Dr. Du Maurier. She told me she believed me. She knew there were others like me.

Did you kill her?

No.

No, indeed, Will thinks. Far from it. Will's mind replays his interactions with her and he recalls her mannerisms, the expressions on her beautiful face, her choice of words and the tone that accompanied them. She either mimics Hannibal, or he mimics her. Will's mouth almost drops open as the thoughts continue to bloom in his head. The creator attempted to create an Eve the first time. But something went wrong and he found he was sharing his garden with a…viper.

Will's dreams begin to take on a different significance. His subconscious has been grappling with this a long time, the knowledge just out of reach, his rod caught, not cast far enough to snare the slippery fish. The fish apparently likes to watch the shark hunt. And the shark had apparently tolerated it. Why? What is Hannibal doing with her now?

She interfered. The viper invaded the garden. Whispered to Adam and Adam ate from the wrong tree. The FBI had taken on the role of Eve in Hannibal's analogy from his dreams. *His* analogy he reminds himself. His nebulous reservations about Du Maurier had found their way into his discussions with the Hannibal in his dreams, surfaced in their conversations. But are the viper and the FBI acting in concert? And to what end, besides Hannibal's? And his own.

Images of a complicit Du Maurier queue up in Will's mind as his imagination creates for him what Hannibal wanted him to see in the strands of blonde hair threading through both crime scenes, wants him to make the FBI see. The red rimmed eyes of the serpent tailed creature biting through its own flesh to release its twitching tail play before his eyes. The tail becomes the sleek and feathered viper he has seen before in his dreams. It attacks the spitting black viper that emerges from the ash covered brambles of his inferno and he watches as both vipers circle and hiss at one another. Hannibal is using this opportunity and Will to finish off Du Maurier. Will wonders at her offense, tries to imagine a betrayal more devastating to Hannibal than his own and cannot. Whatever she has done or Hannibal thinks she has done, is enough to convince Hannibal he no longer has need of her.

She would pretend to be a swan…and presume to remove the goose.

Feathers ruffle along his cheek as Hannibal's voice fills his ear, his words flow like syrup and the lips that nuzzle at his lobes caress like silk.

"Will!" Jack's fingers thrum along the edge of the table, this is clearly not the first time he has called out his name.

"Yeah…um, it suggests they might have travelled together. Did the actual couple resemble them?" Will asks an increasingly concerned Jack.

"White, affluent, both blonde and middle aged, then yes…resembled. We can't prove it was Hannibal, let alone Du Maurier." Jack looks to the floor and grunts, "Smoke…gone just like smoke."

"Was there only one utility uniform missing from the van? Anything to suggest there was an accomplice?"

“No, but you have some ideas, don’t you? I’m wondering, too. What a mess if there are two of them out there.”

Jack grunts in disgust and stares at nothing in particular, lost in his own thoughts for a moment. Foremost among them is how to play Du Maurier when and if she calls. Jack thinks he will never look at psychiatrists the same way again and wonders at how much influence Clayton has with Will, and how much Will exerts over Clayton.

Will nods, thinks Jack’s math is predictably disingenuous or he can’t count, and assumes the dejected attitude Jack expects. “So what now? We don’t have the man power to search for her in Florence.”

“No. If she is the blonde suggested by the tableaux, then we wait for her body to show up or…a cry for help. I would prefer to keep her name out of the investigation for now. I have to disclose the evidence, but I do not have to disclose our thinking on it.”

Like keeping news of the reward Mason posted out of the investigation? “And what is our thinking, Jack?” Will says, tone mild and unassuming as he shoves his hands in his trouser pockets.

Jack thinks of that Ukrainian dish of aspic and fish Hannibal had served him. A canvas with which to stage a scene Hannibal had said.

Aspic is derived from bone. As a life is made from moments.

Who is chasing whom, now? “Du Maurier is a player. Who she is playing remains to be seen.” Jack brushes at the now imaginary white powder on his sleeve.

Will agrees. Jack believes Hannibal might be framing Du Maurier, or involving her on some level as co-conspirator. Will thinks Jack not surprised Du Maurier is in town at all. He knows the tableaux were not arranged by Hannibal alone, but he is not sure who helped and he is puzzled by the circumstances. Will thinks he should call Daniel and relay all this to him before Du Maurier calls him as Dumont about the canine therapy this weekend. He thinks Daniel would continue with the charade, but prefers to leave nothing to chance. Du Maurier must know by now what has happened. Will thinks she will call at some point if only to ascertain what Daniel knows, likely only one of the reasons she engaged him to begin with. The thought she has known about him being in Florence for weeks has blossomed in his mind, and the corresponding associations are troublesome to say the least. As he reaches into the dark blue blazer for his phone, Jack clears his throat again.

“Something else, Jack?”

“About that Polizia officer, Buccieri…”

Will blinks, gives Jack his undivided attention rather than the eye roll he blinked away. Edginess creeps into his limbs and the familiar rippling of feathers spreads along his shoulders. He glances around the room seeking ravens and is relieved they have not followed him today…yet.

“Instead of butchering William, maybe Hannibal is calling you out as a butcher. The artist of the cubist exhibit in the slaughter pit.”

“That’s…quite an endorsement.” Will says, wondering if Jack had really taken this long to interpret Hannibal’s joke, or had just taken this long to tell Will about it.

“He hasn’t lost his sense of humor.” Jack says, offering a tight wry smile.

“Glad somebody thought it was funny.”

Hannibal had been unable to resist choosing the unwitting and unwilling Polizia officer once he had read the name tag. Will understands the thoughtful nod from Hannibal. He had practically signed Will’s name to his masterpiece for him and left the signature in plain sight.

It’s the small things, Will thinks as the glass doors at the far side of the room open and Rinaldo Pazzi walks through, ambling past desks and computer consoles, shoulders hunched forward as he feels along his pockets for what, Will has no idea except cigarettes. He concludes the gesturing more attention seeking behavior. It is not enough to simply walk into FBI headquarters, Pazzi must announce himself.

The swaggering mercifully stops when Pazzi halts in front of Jack, mumbles a good morning though it is almost noon, and offers the barest of nods in acknowledgement of Will who stands behind the cushioned office chair. Will squeezes the soft padding, easing himself into the assault of images that assail his mind as he observes Pazzi make small talk with Jack.

Will takes in the designer label attire, the tastefully small diamond earring, the diamond encrusted wedding band, and the expensive watch, proof of Pazzi’s illusory success. Appearances are important to Pazzi, so important that he believes appearances are equally important to everyone else. The groomed head of hair and beard contrast sharply with the rumpled shirt Pazzi displays like a flag under his lightweight blazer jacket. There is a trace of blush lipstick on his collar meant to be viewed with envy, but Will finds it a tactless banner and completely unconvincing. He thinks it doubtful Pazzi would wear the same shirt he wore to dinner with his wife last night, if that is what happened. Whether or not Pazzi banged his wife does not matter, but the fact that he is going to great lengths to suggest that he did implies that he did not. The shirt seems a deliberate selection meant to be interpreted as careless but is contrived to paint a picture of an evening filled with amorous activity when Will suspects it was anything but. Will imagines the shirt Pazzi wears now drawn from a hamper of days old clothing, the shirt actually worn to dinner stained only with regret. That shirt had been shoved into the hamper in frustration.

A secure husband, even an Italian husband blessed with machismo, would not need to advertise intimacy with his wife. An attentive and loyal husband would not seek to contrive it – he would protect what is his. Pazzi wanders and he naturally assumes his wife does the same. His detectives suspect his marriage is in trouble and Pazzi tries to create an alternate reality for them. Will doubts the lipstick even belongs to his wife. And no man who desires to be viewed as a secure husband advertises his indiscretions to co-workers he just met unless he is insecure about something.

Pazzi’s preoccupation with his appearance and…libido leave no doubt as to where that insecurity rests. Will glances at the pleated trousers that fall roomy and nondescript from Pazzi’s waist. Will bites at his lips and thinks Pazzi suffers from Napoleon syndrome. As Will kneads his lips between his teeth he thinks what a wicked weakness hangs between Pazzi’s legs although hangs is probably too generous a characterization.

“So, did you tell uh…William…” Pazzi pauses, looks to Will, “…can I call you by your first name?”

“If we’re all going to play nice in the sandbox, sure. This is Jack, and I’m Will.”

“Rinaldo.” Pazzi smiles again.

Jack raises a brow, but says nothing. He thinks maybe Will had some Cheerios for breakfast and approves. A little banter between the guys is probably good for him. Jack knows Will spends way too much time in his head…and with his psychiatrist.

"*Bene*." Pazzi says, his smile quick and decidedly insincere. "Did you tell him about our concerns about the online reward?"

Jack's cheeks sink into his face, he sucks them hollow and stares at Pazzi before turning to Will. He wonders what is wrong with Pazzi to just blurt out his thoughts like that. Jack then berates himself. He should have told Will yesterday and passed on the opportunity. It was late and he was tired. And that is exactly how he'll pass it off.

He looks into Will's eyes, sees no acrimony there and feels encouraged. He doubts he would see any judgment in those eyes anyway; Will is far too closed for that.

"I almost mentioned it yesterday, Will, but you and Doctor Clayton were trying to leave and so was I."

"Long day yesterday. Don't worry about it." Will says, "*Rinaldo* told me yesterday. Said it was a lot of money."

Pazzi lifts his chin to Jack and Will feels the tension in the room rise with the tilt of Jack's head in answer. He understands Hannibal perfectly as he watches Jack and Pazzi eyeing each other.

"There is some concern that the reward has the potential to compromise our investigation. The FBI is aware and Interpol certainly. The Polizia has been notified, but only brass and Captain Pazzi. We'd like to keep the gossip to a minimum."

"Understandable." Will says. "The Paolini might take advantage of the offer."

"Which is why I'd like to ask the Captain here if a couple of officers could be assigned to you."

"I have no problem with that." Pazzi says.

"Jack, I don't want to be handled. We've already discussed this. If you want the fish to bite you have to wave the bait."

Jack smiles, figuring Will would resist. Pazzi can always assign a couple guys to Will and Will will never know. Jack needs eyes on Will, and not FBI eyes. Will is Jack's responsibility and it is Jack's ass on the line. Whatever happens, Jack wants to be the last word on it.

"We'll compromise then. Too many fish after the bait this time. I want Doctor Clayton in here as a consultant, but I also want him here to double as you."

"What?" Will's patient expression melts. He understands Jack's thinking, but he doesn't like it.

"Think about it. From a distance he can pass as you. He comes in here, alone, in the morning does his thing consulting. This is FBI headquarters, not Polizia. No Paolini influence inside." Jack nods at Pazzi who shrugs off the insinuation of corruption. "If the Paolini are watching the building, they will see Clayton and believe you are showing up for work. He's surrounded by FBI protection. You are free to pursue your leads in the field. You wear similar clothes every day and you never come in or leave the building at the same time."

“Can’t argue with that.” Will says, knowing he can’t argue with Jack over it. Jack has clearly decided this is what he wants. He has to agree that Daniel is safer at HQ but, leading the Paolini to believe he is Will is another matter.

“When do you plan on telling him about your plan?”

“You can explain it.” Jack says, glancing at Pazzi. Will’s living arrangements should remain a mystery to the Polizia for now. Jack likes things tidy and if anything leaks, he wants to know where to look for the water.

“You know if the Paolini were to go after him, it would be after hours. You want a couple guys watching your place at night?” Pazzi looks at Will, “They could keep their distance, so if you were approached, they would be able to assist…or at least call it in.”

“I appreciate the offer, but unless the Paolini have reason to believe that Hannibal is looking for me, they have a better shot at finding him if they let me do my job…here at a desk.”

Will knows damn well the Paolini have been informed by Mason. So does Jack. He does not know what Pazzi knows, but he soon will. Pazzi will make a move and sooner rather than later.

Pazzi shrugs in his noncommittal way. “That makes sense. Maybe we play this security detail by ear, eh?”

Pazzi lifts his eyes to Jack and Will sees a look pass between them that bothers him but one that he expected. He’s still on the outside looking in. Will glances at his watch thinking he needs to call Daniel. He has a couple hours before meeting Alia at the Uffizi and wonders how much longer Jack is going to stand around with Pazzi.

“You have any new evidence for me?” Pazzi says, fingers tugging at belt buckle, then earring.

“Actually, yes. We should talk about what turned up.”

“I got a fax on the inventory of body parts and organs from both tableaux. What about the sexual messages in the tableaux?” Pazzi asks.

“Sexual messages?” Jack’s face falls as he looks at Pazzi.

Jack is simply stunned. His mouth drops a little. Will takes a breath and waits for Pazzi’s next volley. He is full of them today.

“Images of hell and satanic romance are all over the place. Sex, too it looks like.” Pazzi says in response to Jack’s perturbed expression.

“You mean explicit messages?” Jack finally asks almost groaning. He hesitates glancing at Will, but finds Will bereft of expression when he does.

“Well, uh…the inventory suggests Luciano’s genitals are missing.”

“Maybe they didn’t fit…” Will pauses enjoying the sharp look from Pazzi, “with the design.” He finishes feeling Jack’s eyes on him, and imagines Jack had to have enjoyed the exchange, just a little.

“Lecter eats…organs. I think genitals qualify as organs.” Jack wrinkles his nose, thoughts of numerous meals at Hannibal’s no doubt slipping around his brain.

“You don’t think that’s sexual?” Pazzi asks.

“He’s not eating them this time. He rejected them, both twins, as unworthy for the table.” Will says.

“So you say. But, maybe they’re okay to serve to somebody else, eh? Like his friend.” Pazzi says, avoiding Will’s gaze.

Jack sighs, the sidelong glance at Will is suggestive and likely referring to Du Maurier. Jack has an idea of how friendship works with Hannibal, but it might not occur to him that Hannibal would never serve anything to “friends” he would not consume himself. The entire conversation is irrelevant of course since Hannibal has likely made a banquet of Lucia. Pity has no place at the table, and the twins were far from pitied. The hearts have nothing at all to do with rejection. Pazzi is simply clueless as his remarks confirm and Will decides to explain his reasoning as it applies to this farce in the simplest of terms.

“According to ancient beliefs, consuming the body parts of your enemy is supposed to imbue the victor with whatever attributes the organ or body part is supposed to represent, but…” And that is as far as Pazzi allows Will to get.

“Maybe his friend needed a little help in the area of romance, so he fed him some...help.” Pazzi interrupts, unable to wipe the smirk off his face.

“Or…” Will says, glancing at the ceiling, “…maybe like the emperor Caligula – he fed the genitals to his dogs.”

Jack’s head snaps around to Will. Pazzi grunts and his lips curl with the bark of a laugh that follows. Will blinks, and allows a smile to surface, a docile tugging of his lips as he stares at Pazzi. The reference to Caligula is inaccurate but Will struck the nerve he wanted. Pazzi immediately begins tapping his breast pocket and removes a pack of cigarettes. Jack frowns.

“Fascinating stuff gentlemen…” Jack says, “…but all we keep finding are more questions. I’d like some answers.”

Jack lifts a finger to Pazzi, who waits with his unlit cigarette dangling from his generous mouth.

“I’d like to go over the new evidence and possible routes taken from Florence to the slaughter house with you and…” Jack turns his finger to Will, “I’d like you to catch up with Price and Zeller about their ideas on the cubist tableau. And check how far they got on those birthdates.”

Will stands in the hall, phone in hand and raises a finger in the air to Zeller letting him know he has to take the call. Thankfully, it’s Daniel.

“Hey Daniel, everything ok?”

“Yeah…” comes the quiet reply, “We’re still on for the Uffizi?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ve been sitting here thinking about my sessions with *Victor* and I remembered some stuff you should know. I didn’t think to tell you this morning.”

“I can appreciate why not. It’s okay. I’ve got some news for you, too. But go ahead.”

“First, he did not smell me until his second appointment if I didn’t make that clear and if it means anything. The first appointment, he had gotten there way ahead of me, I was like fifteen minutes late. He had been admiring the prints in the lobby. His reasons for coming were grief related. Said he had lost a daughter. There’s a big one, huh?”

“What else?” Will sighs. Hannibal had not *lost* her.

“Gives me this story how she was killed in an auto accident, but he blames himself, too young to drive and all that. But, get this…I am totally blown away when Dumont tells me later that she had figured the daughter was a fabrication he uses to cover for the real grief issue.”

“What the…?” Will thinks she must have been setting Hannibal up for something. Or trying to. Will cannot figure her angle on this.

“Which was…”

“She said she wasn’t sure but was convinced it involved a man which is why she referred him to me. Thought Victor would be more comfortable talking to a man. His real issues remain undiagnosed. She said she had gone as far with him in therapy as she could.”

“And I’ll bet she didn’t tell him she told you all that. That’s interesting. You had two sessions with him?”

“Yeah. His address is a PO Box, no health insurance, but Will, he told me he lives in Impruneta. And Will…he admitted to *working* in the Uffizi, as an assistant curator in the Vasari Corridor.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Will walks down the hall and away from Zeller’s upturned face.

“I kid you not. Christ Will. We *talked* about the Uffizi. Joked about getting me in, because you know access to the corridor is restricted. The things he said. I’m not sure if he knew you were living with me or not. I’m inclined to think not.”

Hannibal had told Daniel where he lived and worked. If Hannibal had told the truth, he may not have known about Will until the next session. Since Daniel had not seemed to recognize him, Hannibal had felt confident to finish his session. If that is so, then Du Maurier did not tell him either and likely sat on the information – if she knew. Is perhaps still sitting on it. Even more interesting.

“Me too, but why do you think so?”

“Well, from what I know of him, according to you anyway…is that he always presents as superior and in control. Of course he’s in to see me to pretend he needs therapy and I’m not sure what that was about…”

“I have an idea, but go on.”

“When I asked him what he wanted out of therapy, a standard question and one that he would have anticipated, he admitted that he has continued with life after his loss but he’s withdrawn from it. He wanted to find joy again despite the loss. Seems benign and sentimental, but I actually felt those things from him. I felt sadness, pain, and regret from him as viscerally as I feel emotions from you. He wasn’t lying, Will.”

Will is quiet. He knows Daniel probably doesn’t like admitting all this to him, but it is his nature to be honest and Will depends on that honesty from him. Daniel understands that having some idea of Hannibal’s true intentions benefits them both.

“Will? I felt loneliness, too. I remember thinking this guy would have sat in my office all day had I invited him.”

“You look like me. He might have drawn some comfort from that and at the same time, felt…other things.”

“He expressed anger, indignation, too. Before I could explain about my reduced office hours, he must have thought I was going to refer him and the cold…storm that blew in was intense. But his face never changed. He was all happy again after I made it clear I was taking him as a patient. Why did he come to me, Will?”

“Why? No idea at the moment. Maybe on his own. But she referred him. Maybe she didn’t know about me, for a while. Maybe she did and sent him to you to keep tabs on him, to see what he would do...with you.”

Some psychiatrists are so hungry for insight that they may try to manufacture it.

“Maybe both of them have been using you to keep tabs on each other, and us, some game between them. Jack told me that they were unofficially seen together in Paris, so anything is possible.”

“Oh for…Fuck. We have no way of knowing when either of them knew what. Will, he is a really strong presence. I mean he fills a room.”

“Don’t I know it. And he can clear it, too.”

Daniel is quiet at the other end. He thinks Hannibal may have been seeking information on Will. Reciprocity is a tool every psychiatrist uses, and according to Will, Hannibal responds to quid pro quos. Daniel recalls feeling like the patient at different intervals during their sessions. An odd feeling he now can connect to a reason. He turns his thoughts back to his conversation with Will.

“I’m convinced his agenda with you is all about forgiveness. I got the sense that there is some estrangement between him and Dumont…or Du Maurier. He’d say one thing, but I felt another from him and the feelings weren’t what I would call charitable.”

“You understand to keep up appearances with *her*? We have until this weekend to figure something out and who knows what will happen in the meantime.”

“I’ll keep it cool. Fuck…what a snake she is.”

“Yeah…I will have to be careful how I approach this with *him*. I appreciate the call. This narrows my efforts at the museum a lot. They would be more rigid about taking information from employees than your office with patients. And about the museum…I'm wearing a dark blue jacket, so wear something…not blue."

"Ah. So we can switch off…with Alia."

"Exactly. And did you call Rome like Jack wanted?"

"Yeah…gave them Crawford's numbers, let them deal. They seemed impressed. Go figure."

"Well, Jack wants you to consult and to double for me. Be a decoy at headquarters for the Paolini."

"Shit. And for Hannibal, too?"

"I think they think so."

"Oh God…this rabbit hole…"

"I have to go talk with Zee and Price. Anything else?"

"Nah…just call when you hear from Alia. Oh, and Will?"

"What?"

"He said he has a garden. And he's very attached to it, very proud of it."

"Of course he does. Had one in Baltimore, too. I'll call you later." Will clicks off the phone.

Hannibal had allowed Daniel glimpses of himself, having no idea how Daniel was getting those glimpses, or how revealing those glimpses had been. It seems to Will that Hannibal had had an agenda certainly, but perhaps Daniel had surprised him, had not been what Hannibal had expected. Hannibal had said he had instructed Luciano to leave Daniel alone, and Will believes Hannibal had been telling the truth. For the time being, Hannibal understands that Daniel is useful. He is neither Greek nor Trojan but neither is he safe.

"Hey Will." Zeller sticks his head out of the doorway, "You done on the phone?"

"Yeah. So…what have you two come up with?" Will says, shoving his phone in his pocket.

"Well, first off you can tell Jack it will be a while for the birth records. Seems the twins were born with a midwife at home. Can you imagine?"

"Not really. What else?"

Zeller waves a hand to motion Will on into the lab where Price sits arranging crime scene photos on a large table, lit from beneath and hot overhead lights above. Will tugs at the tie and can't wait to take it off for the museum.

"Oh, love the tie, Will. You uh…look good. Meant to tell you that yesterday."

"Thanks, Jimmy." Will is appreciative but unused to compliments from either Zeller or Price and isn't sure how to take them. "Sounds like you were expecting something…not good?"

"Well, you were kind of a wreck…before. And you hear things. You know."

“Probably better that I don’t.”

“Yeah, well… Anyways, we think we have narrowed down a couple of the Luciano frames.”

“Price has been referring to it as Gates of Hell Two – Lecter’s Revenge. I think that’s too long. I’m thinking Lectergate.”

Price huffs and rolls his eyes. “That makes no sense, Zee. It doesn’t even relate.”

“Sounds cool.” Zee pauses then says, “How about…Gates of Lecter, then.”

“Better.” Will says as he ponders the photos Price continues to shove around. “And Lucia?”

“*La Porcellina* of course. But, we’ve been concentrating on Luciano. Oh yeah, did Jack tell you Lucia had a broken rib?”

“Yes. But, let’s focus on Luciano since you’ve got everything set up.”

“Okay, we’ve already established the *Three Shades*. Now the *Thinker*…I know you identified this side as the *Thinker*, Will and I agree, but I was correct also. It’s two figures in one.”

“Show me.” Will says, trying not to smile. Price is more tenacious than Will gave him credit for.

“Well, the placement of the head, what is left of it, is definitely the *Thinker*. Angled down, sedate. But the hands…they aren’t really posed like the *Thinker*. I thought you confused the *Thinker* with *Adam*, but…”

“I said Adam wasn’t included in the final version, which is true, but maybe Hannibal did combine them to make his own *Thinker*.”

“Yes! Everything else about the frame says *Thinker*, but the hands kept nagging at me.” Price says, scratching his chin.

Will leans in to look more closely at the pictures. Price has placed photos of the tableau opposite corresponding photos of Rodin’s *Gates.* Will has to admit, Price has done some excellent research. He wasn’t counting on having his version contradicted, but maybe it’s just as well that Jack doesn’t perceive him as infallible. Jack knows he’s made plenty of mistakes. Huge mistakes. This should be no different.

What’s important is that Hannibal understands *his Thinker* and makes the intended correlations. Will had placed *Rodin’s* Adam atop *his Gates* to preside over the madness passing below. The mortal Creation, alone without Eve, alone in his anguish, banished from the garden, his only sin against the Creator himself and he waits at the gates for the Creator’s touch to release him from his inferno. Will had borrowed the hand gestures from Rodin’s *Adam.* Rodin’s *Adam* and Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* is a much more direct correlation and one that Price might certainly have made given enough time, and incentive. He might make it still, but Will thinks even if he does, the implications would never register, the associations and meaning too exclusive, too private. Too insane.

Hannibal had argued with him for hours in the salon about the various interpretations of Rodin’s take on Dante’s *Inferno.* Hannibal should appreciate the irony. It had been Hannibal who had argued that Rodin had always intended Adam preside over his *Gates*, not Will. Will had argued the *Thinker* was intended as Dante.

Will had placed Luciano's heart in the lower left of the frame, between the hands and beneath one of those arcs he had included in his design, an approximation of where the human heart is located in the body. Luciano's heart is damaged, but it had been wrapped clean and whole, a gift of flesh for the Creator to hold, to cherish, to rip raw and bleeding from his chest.

Sacrament or seduction?

Why not both?

"You're right, the hands don't match the *Thinker*. They match his *Adam*, the one at the Met, in New York. But if you combine Rodin's two figures you get what…a Thinking Adam?"

"That's what I was hoping you could clear up, now that we agree on the figures. Let's see if you agree with my interpretation."

"Good thing you didn't make a bet with him." Zeller says, "He is relentless."

"I'd have gladly paid up if I was wrong." Will says. "Better to get it right, huh Price?"

"Pride cometh before the fall, Zee." Price says. "Well, now Rodin's figures all twist in agony right? So, we're thinking that this *Thinker* is you Will."

"Me?" Will had not expected a correlation with himself.

Price laughs at Will's surprise, "Well, yes. Um…there's some rib there, see?"

"Yeah, I see."

"And vertebrae, and a chunk of the pelvic area…all corresponding to your uh…wound. And since you were the lead character in the production you and Jack tried to pull off, it seems appropriate that you…"

"Take center stage. I get it. Not bad. What did Jack say?" Will had not placed those pieces there on purpose, but if Price wants to run with this interpretation, Will is fine with it.

"Not much. He just nods and says to run it past you. So we're running it past you." Zeller says.

"You preside over Lecter's *Gates of Hell* because like Adam, you bear the brunt of all the sins committed against him and like the *Thinker* you live to ponder your offense for all eternity. It was you who figured out he was the Ripper." Price says.

"He wants you to blame yourself for sending everyone else there." Zee says being helpful.

"And the heart, organ of emotion. Also identifies you. Your empathy."

"That…fits quite well with the actual narrative, doesn't it? If I am the *Thinker*, then you have been making correlations with Hannibal's actual victims and placing them in his *Gates.*"

"We have! This won't be too painful for you?" Price says, eyebrows up and mouth turned down. "I mean, everyone was close to all of us, but Zee and I sort of watched from the sidelines. You were so close to it all."

Will looks from one to the other and considers the two men leaning over the table, faces expectant and trusting. Will shoves the guilt away, shoves it in a closet too small, but he pushes anyway and offers a tired smile.

"I don't have a monopoly on sadness or pain. Your pain is just as valid as mine. We all…miss Beverly. And…Alana. I'll be okay. Let's just get this done. I have to meet Doctor Clayton in an hour or so."

"Oh, okay. Good. Uh…we think we have Alana and Beverly over here." Zeller points to a series of photos of one frame. A frame Will filled with random pieces. He marvels Zee and Price found an image in the frame, and more amazed they agree on it.

"They seem to correspond to the *Damned Women* on the upper right portico of the *Gates*. See the knees and leg bones contorted? And an elbow here. Four pig's eyes, so that makes two women. A hoof here…"

Will nods and agrees with Zeller as he talks Will through the frame of the tableau. Thankfully, they have only had enough time to analyze two of the frames and of course, rethink Will's *Thinker*.

Alia wanders around the gift shop inside the Uffizi with Will, his hand at the small of her back guiding her around the displays as they walk, rather carouse like a couple of tourists on their honeymoon. They had trailed along the gallery halls together, holding hands, while waiting for Daniel to arrive and since Daniel had phoned he was running late, sitting in traffic, the taxi creeping along, they had wandered some more. Will had told him to ride it out and stay cool in the cab. Alia had taken that as her cue to play her role a bit more…convincingly.

She had pulled Will close, taking advantage of their *cover* as Will had characterized the rational for their constant touching, and had stolen a kiss from him in front of a Masaccio and another as they had stood admiring a Botticelli. Will's eyes had lifted from her face to look around as she had wrapped her arms about his neck and she had felt him flush warm with the attention they were receiving from other tourists.

Murmurs of c*he bello* had filtered through her ears, and she had known, as had Will, that it had not been the paintings that had prompted the sighs of appreciation. He had licked his lips as he pulled away, pale blue eyes shining with delight and embarrassment as he had taken her wrist and led them to another hall, admonishing her to tone it down a bit.

She had ignored him of course, and had snuggled even closer as they passed by piece after piece of Early Renaissance masters, Will trying to focus on the paintings, while her attentions had been completely focused on him. Even now as they amble around the gift shop, the press of his hand above the dimples at her lower back sends her blood to throbbing and her breath to catch.

And he smells wonderful. When he inclines his head to look at her, the movement sends wafts of his cologne right into her nose and her mind is consumed with thoughts of ripping his clothes off… As she looks at Will with his clothes on, she decides he looks especially handsome today, the blue of the blazer enhances the blue of his eyes, and they seem more intense than usual. She would like to think he made the extra effort to look this appealing just for her, as she had for him.

She had agonized over what to wear to the Uffizi today, settling finally upon an ensemble of pinks and greens that flatter both her complexion and her figure. Wills seems appreciative. He scolds her with his words, but his eyes say something else. It is the something else Alia clings to even though she knows she should not. The sense of urgency with Will is pervasive, as though he might slip away if she were to turn her head too long in the opposite direction. As soon as Daniel gets here, he will slip away from her to hunt for the serial killer who haunts his every waking moment it seems.

This visit to the Uffizi has occupied Alia's thoughts since Will had brought it up at the crime scene. Will had patiently answered her questions about his intentions, but his answers had been somewhat vague and she knows he isn't telling her everything because she is a detective. He won't confirm or deny anything leaving her to her own interpretations. She supposes it has to be this way, like he had said. He is trying to insulate her from any fallout for what he does, or has to do. He knows she must be able to claim deniability with some degree of credibility should she be questioned, especially by Pazzi.

Pazzi has been on her like *vola sulla merda,* and like the flies, he continues to buzz around. She has to answer her phone sooner or later and later it will be. Will had told her to follow her instincts, to do her job. He had told her the same thing again earlier while thanking her at the same time for her help. Then, as now, she is receiving mixed messages from him, and her mind reels with agitation even as she tries to bury it with him maddeningly close beside her.

Will's phone chirps and he retrieves it quickly, smoothly as though he had been expecting the call.

"Hey…the cafeteria? Okay. Yeah…bathroom. We're on our way."

"He's waiting for you in the men's room? What took him so long?"

"Seems your friend's boyfriend had somewhere else to be. Daniel had to wait to get in the main entrance like everyone else. Long line. We'll switch jackets in the men's room. And you'll be married to him, now."

He smiles warmly and she smiles back. The thought of playing the same role with Daniel is not at all unpleasant. She takes out her phone and taps the shoulder of the American customer looking at the book display. She knows she's an American by the clothes. No style whatsoever.

"I'm so sorry to intrude. Would you take a picture of us, please?"

Alia ignores the flash of blue as Will turns his head around. His fingers find her hip and he pinches her, though his mouth remains drawn up in that tight bow she knows well.

"Oh! Of course." The older woman says her southern accent as thick as her ankles. "Aw, what a lovely couple you are. You look just like one of these pretty Madonna's. A little closer…that's better. Now…smile!"

Alia stands slightly in front of Will, head against his shoulder as his arms engulf her from behind. She thinks the pose perfect. So does their photographer who snaps a photo, and another for luck. She hands the phone back to Alia who thanks her, profusely. She returns to the book display but not before casting an appraising glance at the two of them, eyes lingering on Will, of course.

"Taking your assignment a little seriously, aren't you?" Will asks he nudges her toward the exit.

“I take all my assignments seriously. I am…very good at my job.” Alia twists her lips and nudges him back.

“Let’s see how convincing you are with Daniel.” Will teases, leaning into her ear as they leave the shop.

Daniel holds Alia’s hand as they walk along one of the long corridors of ancient Greek and Roman statues. She grasps it tightly, squeezing now and again and that seems to be keeping him focused. Daniel is too buzzed to be embarrassed. He is sure she has to know he’s on something. He likes the quiet of the corridor. This corridor is not as crowded as the hall they just left, where the paintings of Leonardo had pulled a constant line of tourists through the hall like a string.

He thinks he should make conversation but he’s not sure if he just said something, or if he merely thought about saying it. Alia is a vision of loveliness this afternoon. He likes the way her hair is swept to the side to better see the pretty fresh face that beams up at him from time to time. Daniel does not miss the graze of nipple brush across the thin fabric of the dress she wears or the soft skin of her shoulders whenever the crop jacket slips off the gauzy muslin. He feels very relaxed as they stop to admire the athletic statue of *Hermes* that has caught Alia’s attention.

As she stands next to him he notices how soft her skin appears. Though the scent of cigarettes permeates from her jacket, it is not overpowering. He can detect the aroma of lavender and vanilla along her neck. She has a very kissable neck. Daniel can imagine kissing that bronzed skin clear down her back…or front. He thinks he really has no preference. He leans down.

He presses his lips to her hair and inhales the scent of lavender again. She turns her head and lifts her chin.

“Are you trying to kiss me, Daniel?”

“That depends. Are you going to let me?”

He edges closer, so close his whiskers brush her cheek, just like Will did, does... Daniel smells good too, different…but really, really good. She closes the space between them so her lips almost graze the stubble of his upper lip. She waits and tilts her head back when Daniel closes his mouth over hers.

Alia tastes as sweet as he imagined she would as Daniel presses his lips to hers, feels the tingle of excitement from her, the warm pulse of satisfaction from her swims along in the current of his own delight at the sensation of soft flesh and twisting tongue. The kiss lasts longer than he expected, and she wipes the back of her hand across her mouth as she pulls back.

She is as surprised as he is. Her brown eyes are bright, still flickering with the current coursing through her nerves. She fiddles with her earring, and smiles as she draws her lower lip inside, a thoughtful look on her face.

“That was, uh…nice.”

“Yeah, it was. There’s a really interesting stairwell at the end of the hall.” Daniel grins.

Alia chuckles, a tremulous sound, light as air and very sexy. Daniel thinks Will had himself a handful while he had been passed out on Du Maurier's couch. She tugs at his tie and turns on her heel to gaze at the statue of *Hermes* once again, but she folds into Daniel as he stands behind her, hands about her waist.

Alia is having a wonderful time. And, she thinks, she's on the clock. She feels the tension from the situation with Lecter looming over both Will and Daniel, but here, in the museum, the tension seems remote. She wants to enjoy the visit here, before she has to return to the harsh realities of her job and the insufferable inquisition that waits for her once Pazzi learns where she spent her afternoon.

She looks around a moment and then stretches out a hand to run her fingers along the smooth shiny arm that appears almost as real as Daniel's arm that stretches alongside hers to touch the white marble that is surprisingly cool to the touch. The detail is so phenomenal that the chill of the marble is unexpected.

The naked torso of the Greek god reminds him of the conversation with Will in the men's room a half an hour ago. He thinks it was half an hour ago.

Daniel had watched Will check under all the stalls before standing in front of the rows of sinks to remove his blazer. He had paused and gestured for Daniel to get on with removing his.

"*A pink shirt? Really*?" Will had said as he had stood in front of Daniel, holding his blazer in one hand, the other ruffling through curls in exasperation.

"*It's the 21st century, Will. Everybody wears pink*."

The impulse to suggest there wouldn't be a problem if Hannibal wore pink shirts had died on his lips, his head humming in a haze of diazepam. That's not what Will had meant. He had clamped his mouth shut, thinking it was the drugs affecting him. He had reminded himself to keep his mouth closed no matter what ridiculous thoughts slid around his head.

"*I have a yellow shirt. Now we have to change shirts, too. C'mon…hurry up*."

Will had leaned in and scrutinized his face and his eyes at that point. He had taken a deep breath, and his shoulders had slumped in a sympathetic sigh. "*You medicated*."

"*Think I might have taken too much*."

Will had scratched at his neck, waiting for Daniel to unbutton his shirt. Daniel had felt his fingers moving in slow motion, had been fascinated with the gleam of the buttons and had suddenly felt Will's hands at his front, deftly slipping the buttons free, then tugging the cotton from his shoulders.

"*Daniel, focus. Before somebody comes in here and wonders what we're doing. You were supposed to wear the same color shirt, just a different color jacket*."

Daniel had held his arm out as Will had slipped off his own shirt and handed it to him. After buttoning up Daniel's pink shirt on himself, he had quickly finished buttoning up Daniel, his jaw working from side to side and Daniel had stood biting his lip and looking at the ceiling feeling like a chastised child.

"*How buzzed are you*?" Will had said, amusement glittering behind the blue.

"*About fifteen milligrams buzzed. I probably shouldn't have taken that last five…*"

"*No, you shouldn't, but nothing to be done now*." Will had said slipping on the pale green jacket and nodding at Daniel to do the same.

"*Why are we doing this again*?"

"*I've established Alia and me as a couple for the security people, who know she's a cop and for the Paolini if they are here. I don't want anyone to know I was here for him. Whatever I find, I'm not inclined to share*."

"*Right. Not even with Alia*?"

"*Definitely not with Alia. She will be obliged to tell her boss. If she doesn't know, she can't tell him*."

Will had walked to the windows overlooking the *Loggia dei Lonzi* terrace and had nodded toward the door, "*Go ahead. I'll wait here and give you a few minutes to leave the cafeteria.*"

Daniel had hesitated, "*Will*?"

"*Yeah*?" Will had said looking up from the view of the terrace below, thoughts already someplace else.

"*What are you going to do if you run into him*?" Daniel had asked him, eyes on the door rather than Will.

"*Stop running. Alia's waiting*."

"Daniel!" Alia's voice rings sharply in his ear.

"Shhh. What?" Daniel looks around, getting his bearings.

"You just zoned out. Thought I was with Will for a minute." Alia looks into his eyes and pokes him in the ribs. "Are you high?"

"As if you couldn't tell. Yes I'm high."

"What did you take?"

"A little something to *take* the edge off…detective."

"Some edge. Why did you have to take anything?"

"Anxiety. From yesterday. I had a…delayed reaction this morning. I'm not used to seeing bodies and certainly not like that."

"No, neither am I. But I guess you found the whole process pretty impersonal, huh?"

"Very. And the images just won't go away. Will and I talked in the bathroom; he knows I'm a little out of it today."

“He’s a little out of it, too. He’s going off the reservation isn’t he?”

“He’s trying to figure out some things on his own. As his therapist, I approve.”

“*Daverro*. What are the two of you up to, *really*?”

“What did Will tell you?”

Alia sniffs and brushes her hair from her shoulders, an impatient gesture and the movement reveals the side arm concealed beneath her crop celery colored jacket. The sight of the holstered weapon clicks in Daniel’s head and the fog he has been experiencing thins considerably.

“Okay. Why the Uffizi? Can you tell me that much?” She says tossing her head.

Alia runs her fingers along the lapels of his jacket, looks up into his face. He presses his lips together as he thinks, the habit all too familiar to her.

“Will has been in his home, in Baltimore, many times. Said he had reproductions of a lot of Uffizi pieces. Just a hunch really, he wanted to look around.”

“Huh. I’ll bet. How’s his therapy going? Is he getting better?”

“I think so. He’s working through his issues. The trip here is part of that.”

“Is he always in therapy when he is with you?” Alia looks deeply into the green eyes that stare back at her.

“Twenty-four seven.” Daniel smiles. He tugs on her arm, pulls her away from *Hermes.* “Except when we’re at crime scenes, then I need therapy. Let’s walk.”

Will cannot thank Zeller enough for his primer on computer hacking. He stands at a computer terminal in the Human Resources office in the lower level of the Uffizi’s vast storage area. His hand obscures the flash drive he has inserted into the port that is now downloading from the employee files. He continues to look up from the terminal to smile at the helpful secretary who is letting him peek at the archive of past exhibits so he can locate the one he wants to request lesson plans for. For the art history class he teaches back in D.C.

He is a visiting professor from the States, on vacation but he just can’t help gathering materials for his course while he is here in beautiful culture-rich Florence. Will had agreed with her that it was unfortunate that he couldn’t remember which of the numerous exhibits on Dante he remembers. And the Uffizi has sponsored so many exhibits on Dante over the years. Locating the one he wants might take some time…

Alia had looked very fine today. She had dressed up, that much was obvious. Hair arranged off her neck, outfit bright and seductively clingy. Her natural beauty remained uncompromised though. She still had not succumbed to wearing even lipstick. Consequently, her mouth had melted into his, warm and wet, and Will thinks, far too easily.

Will’s thoughts meander, much like the aimless wandering tour he had taken with Alia. He thinks not so aimless for her. She had enjoyed his attentions and kisses as much, if not more than he had. Will doesn’t require his empathy to see her design. He doesn’t like deceiving her but he is getting used to his decisions being painted with regret. He has apparently adjusted his thinking to manage the anticipation of regret so that it does not cause him to make dubious decisions.

After walking the halls of the Uffizi Will can understand the allure it holds for Hannibal. Surrounded by the art he loves and taking on a position that allows him to influence the minds of the visitors who take his tours and listen to his lectures must approximate the life he left behind. Will figures Hannibal does not spend much time in the Uffizi proper. His position requires he spend his time in the Vasari Corridor, the long stretch of halls that winds through a sizable chunk of the city and across the Arno to the Palazzo Pitti. Even if Will could get past the security to walk the Corridor, he does not have the hours it would take to cover the distance.

And there is the distraction. Will's mind whirls with the images on the walls, the statues in the halls, and the deluge of tourists around him. There is also the presence of his constant companion; its talons scrape along the tiled floors behind him wherever he goes. He knows it perches on the table behind him, preening its black feathers and twitching its scaly tail along the row of computers.

A green glow blinks between his fingers and Will's eyes move to the screen to read the process is complete. He has to move to another terminal to open the files and read. He has stayed here long enough. He disengages the drive and clicks to the Exhibit Archive where he is supposed to be. He quickly chooses a Dante themed past exhibit at random and writes it down on the request form he was given.

He hands it off to the secretary and waits for his lesson plans. His phone goes off and he rolls his eyes as he reads the caller id.

"Yeah, Jack."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the Uffizi, with Daniel."

"I gave him the day off, not you. What are you doing there?"

"Research. We're dealing with a lot of art references here. I remember a lot of the art in his home. Just looking for connections Jack."

Alia is thinking she likes how uninhibited Daniel seems with his dose of anti-anxiety medication. Whatever he took, it has really loosened him up. Always more gregarious than Will, he is even more flirty on the drugs. Though, not enough to spill the beans on what he and Will are actually looking for here. She rubs at her lips absently, remembering the kiss. And the several that followed.

Not for the first time this afternoon she ponders her evolving relationship with Daniel and Will. They seem to have become more alike. They behave similarly and they didn't when she had first met them. She smiles up at Daniel as he guides her along the hall toward the Michelangelo exhibit.

She thinks the two of them *feel* very similar, too. Similar in their attitudes, but different, too. She does not sense the hesitation and reserve she still senses in Will from Daniel. As for the feel of their bodies, Daniel warms up right away; the heat is instantaneous when kissing Daniel. If she had agreed, she has no doubt they would be in that stairwell right now.

Daniel’s phone beeps in his pocket. He takes a look and presses the phone to his ear looking at Alia as he does.

“Will?”

“Looks like I’m done here. Jack called and I have to go back to the ranch.”

“Oh, how was he?”

“Pissed, but he cooled off. We’re just doing a little research. Which is pretty much all it is. I got what I wanted. He was truthful about Impruneta. Unbelievable.”

“Then, maybe it isn’t. Believable.”

“You could be right. We’ll see, but not today. Ask Alia if she can take you back to Fiesole instead of a cab.”

Daniel lifts his eyes to Alia’s, “Will wants to know if you can give me a lift home.”

“Yeah. Do you two have a protection detail, yet?”

“No, why?”

“Well, I can stay for a bit, until Will gets back. I know you want to keep your living arrangements quiet. I can make sure we’re not being followed.” Alia pats her jacket.

“Will? She says no problem. You okay with her hanging around for a bit?”

“Had a nice day at the museum didn’t you?” Will says.

“Hmm. What time you think you might be heading back?”

Will laughs. “Take your chances… Tell her not to piss off Pazzi to the point the he penalizes her for it. I need her. And I don’t want that prick giving her a hard time for it.”

“Gotcha. So, you are taking a cab?”

“I think I’ll walk. It’s not that far to the Piazza Repubblica from here. Traffic is no better than earlier, maybe worse…”

“Tell him to take Via della Speziale if he is walking. He’ll come up behind the Piazza right to the arch.”

“Will? She says take…”

“I heard. Tell her thanks. I will. I’ll see you two later I guess.”

The pavement is hot beneath Hannibal’s feet though he stands in the shade of the colonnade outside the Uffizi as his eyes scan the small piazza. He spots the two young men he has been watching circle the piazza for several minutes. He knows Will left the museum within the last few minutes but he could not determine from which exit. He is certain these young men are up no good.

Hannibal cannot decide if they are undercover Polizia or Paolini. He begins to walk, but they do not seem to take notice. He leaves the piazza and the young men behind.

Hannibal had been surprised to see Will and the intriguing Detective D'Angelo browsing in the gift shop. He had observed them for several minutes, had watched a matronly woman with varicose veins take their picture, and had watched Will nuzzling at a very tasty ear on his way out. D'Angelo must have been very distracting since Will had not looked around long enough to notice Hannibal on the other side of the glass pane watching him shuffle through a print display.

To be fair, the detective had scarcely left him alone for any length of time. She is lovely enough that Hannibal would find himself similarly distracted and tempted. Hannibal had received the distinct impression that their familiarity extended beyond today's interaction. Hannibal had been puzzled by the amorous behaviors being demonstrated by both of them until he had caught sight of them again, in the hall of Greek and Roman statues.

Only it had not been Will. Clayton was now the one nuzzling the detective and Will's visit to the Uffizi with the detective had become clear. Will had used Clayton as a decoy so he could prowl the Uffizi, alone, probably paying a visit to Human Resources. Hannibal thinks he should expect to see Will in Impruneta sometime soon. Hopefully, alone again.

Clayton and the detective had nuzzled their way down the corridor of statues until Clayton had taken a call from Will. If Will is headed for the arch as the detective had suggested, Hannibal has been able to deduce which route Will might take. Hannibal smiles to himself. If, Will were predictable, which…he is not.

He catches sight of the young men from the museum piazza again. He watches the young men walking ahead of him, taking care to slow down. They split up, each taking the opposite side of the street, then crisscross the street and do it again at the next corner. They nod at each other from across the street. Their clothing is nondescript, meant to be ignored and forgotten. He thinks he sees a resemblance to Luciano in the jowls and nose, and certainly in the stout musculature and barrel chests.

The two Paolini walking briskly a half block ahead of him have rounded the corner. They are now traversing Via delle Farine and Hannibal finds he has lost the young Paolini amidst the throng, but he has found a head of soft curls and a green blazer scarcely a quarter block ahead of him. Thankfully, today Will is predictable. Another few blocks will bring him up to Via degli Speziali. He dials Luciano's phone.

Will is tempted to slip off the jacket and stuff it in the nearest trash receptacle except that the jacket is not his. His arms are drenched inside, the shirt is stuck to his back like wet newspaper and he thinks he should have taken a taxi.

He had needed to get some air. Outside air, not air pumped and recycled and so stale and ripe with the scent of people that he had hardly been able to shove the exit doors open quickly enough. The blast of air had calmed him immediately, despite the heat of the blast. He slows his pace wondering why he is in such a hurry to get back to Jack and more stale air. He thinks he should adjust his work ethic somewhat.

His phone chirps from his pocket and he almost doesn't answer it. Jack is unusually impatient he thinks as he lifts the phone out. His mind freezes and he almost stops walking as he reads Luciano's number across the tiny screen. He presses his thumb to the screen and holds the phone to his ear.

"Hello, Will. Don't turn around. Are you aware you are being followed?"

"By someone other than you I take it. Who?"

"Paolini would be my best guess. "

"Word travels fast."

"Apparently."

"How many?"

"Two that I saw. I lost them at the corner. I did not see you until I turned the corner. I imagine they followed you from the Uffizi."

A pause, "You were there?"

"Walked right past you in the gift shop. But we can chat later. You are still quite a distance from the Piazza Repubblica."

"Yes, I am and they will likely intercept me before I get there. Where are you?"

"Half a block behind you."

"Have they seen you?"

"Not that I am aware. Ah! If you look in the windows to your left you should see his reflection."

"I see him…looks like Luciano a little."

"You are of course free to take them yourself, but two against two are better odds."

"I do like those odds better. What are you thinking?"

"Do you trust me?"

"To take out the Paolini? Yes."

"Do you have a weapon?"

"No."

"Then we'll have to make do. Go up to the next block. There's a deli there, Di Constanza's I think it's called. Go inside, walk straight out the back, no one will stop you. Take your immediate right. There's an alley there, perfect for an ambush."

The call ends. Will stares at the phone. He reaches the corner and manages to remember to stop and look before crossing the street. He slows his pace, takes in deliberate breaths as he walks like he hasn't a care in the world. The Paolini won't confront him on a main street. He has plenty of time because they won't make a move until he does.

He sees the sign for Di Constanza's up ahead. He feels his limbs throb in anticipation; and his mind begins to focus, like a cloud of dust, a cyclone contracting to a singular point in space. He pushes open the door to the deli and is immediately assaulted by the smell of oil frying in garlic and onions. He strides past the confused faces of customers and employees working behind the counter to enter the backroom. It's a mess. He quickly scans the area, notes the shelves of stock as his eyes finally alight on the exit. He pulls that door open, steps outside into shade, the courtyard is distinctly cooler and more importantly darker.

Will sees there are multiple arched entrances converging on the little courtyard, each of them a tunnel between buildings on either side. Florence is a maze of brick, stone, and concrete and this courtyard with its multiple arched alleyways is no different. The buildings surrounding the courtyard vary in stories, but no roof is low enough to scramble up on. Or down from.

Will takes the first right into the adjacent darkened alley and stops to wait, facing out. He immediately feels a body to his back and a hand close tightly over his mouth. He struggles against the larger muscular frame, elbow bent to deliver a pointed jab.

"Will." Hannibal closes his eyes as Will's breath fills his hand. He inhales the dark curls at his nose.

Will relaxes and feels the arm around his left shoulder loosen. He cranes his neck to look behind him as he nods into the hand over his mouth. He is surprisingly calm as he breathes the scent of sandalwood and spiced leather he knows, and has missed. Will stands as still as time seems to.

Hannibal drops his hand, reluctantly, and steps back so Will can turn all the way around to face him. He watches intently as Will dips his left shoulder so he can angle his head upward as he twists around. An elegant maneuver from Will, and appreciated. Hannibal gazes into the sea of pale blue as Will lifts his eyes. The longing is profound.

They stand facing each other at the edge of the archway, and Will has only seconds to consider the face before him, the chiseled nose, the luminous eyes, the lips he can conjure from memory every time he closes his eyes. He notes the stubble, almost smiles and observes how the locks are dark and long, the hair frames Hannibal's face so it appears even more angular in the shadows that seem to follow them both.

"I wish we had more time." Hannibal says reaching to his back pocket and retrieving a knife which he holds out to Will, blade first. It is the only weapon he brought, but Hannibal's design does not require that he use it, just Will.

Associations come quickly and Will's mouth falls open and he can't help but flinch as he eyes the blade in Hannibal's hands. He glances up at Hannibal, unable to utter a single syllable.

Hannibal quickly turns the blade around, extends it to Will again, handle this time. Will takes it from him slowly, eyes wide and lips pressed tightly together. Will turns the serrated edged knife in his hand, grasps it in a reverse grip, so the blade is horizontal and extended from the flesh of his palm.

Hannibal nods with approval. Will is allowing his instincts to guide him. "He's coming." Hannibal says, nodding out to the courtyard at Will's rear.

Will turns his head and inches downward, practically squats, back pressed against the cool stucco wall, head to the side, nose almost flush with the edge of the wall. He holds the knife close to his chest, blade out. When he looks up, Hannibal is gone.

A moment later, Will hears the scrape of boots on the pavement. Muscles tense as the sound of scraping draws closer. He senses hesitation in the footsteps, then silence. He keeps the blade still, careful to shelter it from any light that might catch and give his position away. He sees movement in front of him, and Hannibal steps out from across the courtyard from another alley.

He stands in profile, head down, as though his attention is focused on the ground, but Will knows it is not. Hannibal turns his head slowly to look at the Paolini that Will cannot see, but knows is close. Hannibal lifts his head and gives Will the slightest of nods.

Hannibal can see Will crouched against the wall from his angle. He can see Will as well as he can see the Paolini cousin or whatever he is raise the knife in his hand and lunge toward Hannibal, eyes riveted to Hannibal and only Hannibal.

As Hannibal had intended. He watches Will close his eyes, watches him virtually transform right in front of him as the pale blue eyes open, and the predator emerges. He springs from the wall, twisting his body around so that his blade finds its mark. It sinks into flesh directly beneath the rib cage to its serrated hilt. Will twists the blade, and in one graceful turn of his wrist rips the torso open taking the blade clear past the navel until the belt buckle prohibits Will from going any further.

Will's arm comes up and out from the bloodied trail of entrails leaving a spray of blood along the pale stucco walls. The young and soon to be dead Paolini sinks to his knees, chin on his chest as he watches his innards spill from the gaping split. The young Paolini's eyes roll up in his head and Will rises from the cracked stone floor, to stand over the twitching body. He feels...powerful.

A guttural cry erupts from the alley behind Hannibal and he turns in time to see the other Paolini barreling down the alley directly at him. Hannibal thinks he should be able to see his relative on the ground from this direction. Hannibal wonders if he will notice the eviscerated remains before or after Hannibal disarms him.

Will hears the cry from who he assumes is the relative of the Paolini at his feet. He looks to Hannibal who catches his eyes and then turns to the dark figure that comes hurtling out from beneath the arch.

Will has never seen Hannibal actually kill anyone. He had snapped Mason's' neck, but there had been no sport in that. He watches Hannibal move aside as the young Paolini rushes past him, knife extended in front, not reverse like Will's had been. As the young man corrects and turns, he raises his arm, knife in fist, very much like Luciano had come at Will.

Hannibal lets him get close and then bends forward, lunges head first and knocks the young man, knife and all backward. He slams him to the pavement, head cracking against stone and Hannibal is on top of him, in one fluid motion his hands slip to the man's wrist, thumb grinding painfully while the younger man punches at Hannibal with his other hand.

The punching soon stops however as the knife is barely in Hannibal's hands before Will sees the familiar arterial spray erupt against the walls, sending splatter in three directions at once. He glances again at the body beneath him, notes the pool of blood spreading quickly as the young man's body quivers with the last of its reflexive twitching.

Will walks over to stand next to Hannibal. Hannibal is poised over his kill, eyes riveted to the dying man’s face as his life ebbs into the concrete. He looks over Hannibal’s shoulder as he kneels over the body. The young man’s throat has been slit, clean through severing the windpipe. The jugular continues to spew blood as Hannibal drops the young Paolini's knife to the ground. He turns to look up at Will.

“Magnificent.” Hannibal murmurs. He rises slowly, admiring his creation as he does.

“I hear sirens.” Will says, not quite sure what Hannibal is referring to. “You’d better go. I’ll handle this.”

Hannibal hears them too. He looks around the courtyard. Although no one was reckless enough to come outside, he knows witnesses lurk behind the curtains above. He can see the witnesses staring from behind the screen of the deli door. He looks back to Will, who is extending the knife he gave him, handle first.

Will can’t keep the knife even though it is obvious he used one to kill the man still bleeding out a few feet from him. The knife is Hannibal’s and explaining why he has it is not something Will wants to explain.

“I’m not sure I should return this or not. My fingerprints are on it.” Will says, his tone even, quiet.

Hannibal takes the knife from him, grasps it tightly. “As are mine.” Hannibal says, checking that the blade is clean before slipping it into his boot. It is.

He looks into Will’s face as he stands with hands balled into bloody fists, somehow looking helpless and dangerous at the same time. That is Will. A paradox. Infuriating as he stares at Hannibal in silence. Beautiful as he stands streaked with blood in the singular column of sunlight that Hannibal thinks envelops him like a halo.

He clenches his hands at his sides. The desire to take Will’s head in his hands and draw him close is maddening. Will might resist. There are too many witnesses to consider. And Will requires time to process. Patience. He allows his fingers to relax and turns to go. Without looking back, Hannibal walks up the alley from where the young Paolini had emerged.

Will watches him disappear into the darkened alley, watches his silhouette vanish in the bright light at the other side. He draws a deep quivering breath and then begins to search the courtyard for the knives wielded by the Paolini. He needs to...have a look at them, before they become evidence.

Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

Du Maurier contemplates Hannibal’s intentions and gives Jack the phone call he’s been waiting for. Will deals with the aftermath of the slaughter.

Will shifts in his chair, his posture conveying to Jack the apology and gratitude he expects without having to articulate words that Jack likely finds meaningless, if not insincere, at this point.

“Jack…I do appreciate your position. My presence here is disruptive to the investigation. I invite chaos. There will be a next time.”

“Yes, there will. And that is the main reason the charges against you have been…put on hold.”

“So I’m wanted in two countries now, just like Hannibal.”

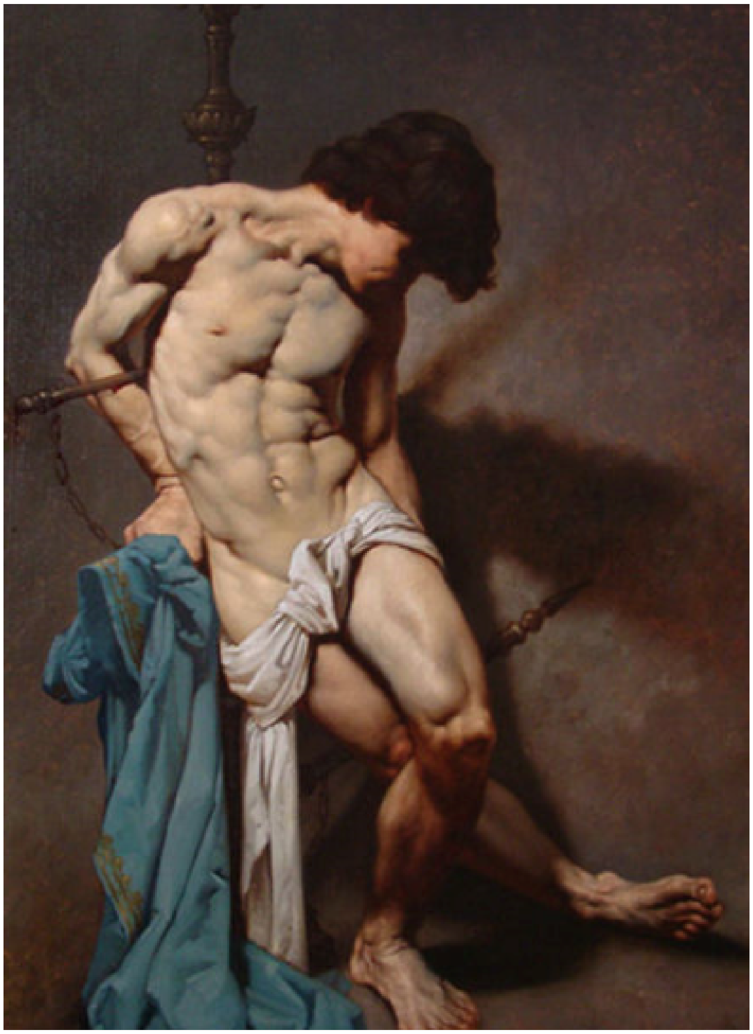
“Are you?”

“What?”

“Just like Hannibal?”

Chapter 67

Du Maurier contemplates Hannibal’s intentions and gives Jack the phone call he’s been waiting for. Will deals with the aftermath of the slaughter.



San Sebastiano, Roberto Ferri

Du Maurier sits refreshed at her kitchen table wrapped in another of her animal inspired silk robes, a zebra print, as she presses the plush towel against her head, hair still wet from the shower. She needs the shower and the full glass of crisp Sauvignon Blanc after her afternoon with Lydia. Du Maurier had been unable to assume her usual detachment from her patient and her neuroses, almost flinching with irritation several times during the course of their therapy session. She listens to a collection of Bach sonatas, played softly, the melodies are pleasing and the inclusion of the harpsichord is…unobtrusive.

She runs her finger along the lip of the glass, wondering what Hannibal is up to at this moment. Hannibal has been especially exuberant with his preoccupation of the Paolini and the arranging of his tableaux and he is especially animated regarding the resultant manhunt. Du Maurier knows for whom the gleam in Hannibal's eye burns and the reason for the cheerful note that punctuates his speech. He had even phoned her from the museum this afternoon, to apologize for breaking their dinner plans.

Bedelia, my apologies. It was remiss of me not to reschedule our dinner arrangements.

Apology accepted, Hannibal and hardly necessary given the circumstances. Perhaps dining out should wait.

You are welcome to join me in Impruneta. I'm preparing a Sardinian inspired menu.

I shall consider it, Hannibal. And thank you.

Du Maurier does not ponder the reason for this dinner invitation. Of course, it has nothing to do with the fact that Hannibal's pantry and meat locker are overflowing with Sardinian ingredients. It is not a matter of if Du Maurier decides to accept the invitation; it is a matter of when. One does not refuse a dinner invitation from Hannibal and expect not to see him. If Du Maurier aspires to maintain those boundaries she prizes, she will be accepting the dinner invitation shortly.

This means Hannibal has certain expectations and Du Maurier would be well advised to meet them.

Her phone sits on the table, and she feels her neck muscles tighten each time she reaches for it to call Jack Crawford. Disappointment is an emotion she has seemingly felt in perpetuity since joining Hannibal on the plane. She imagines Hannibal feels the same emotion though for different reasons. However, disappointment does not begin to describe the swell of bitterness that seems now to taint her existence. Du Maurier has not felt the bite of anger so deeply and as Hannibal knows, anger can be quite motivating.

What had begun as a simple agenda to separate herself from Hannibal has now entrenched her more deeply than before. She would be drowning were it not for the fact that she holds both Bank Suisse codes. There is one silver lining to the arrival of the FBI and that is that Du Maurier has more than one means of either capturing or killing Hannibal. Hannibal may yet draw them to himself without any help from Du Maurier. He certainly expects to draw Graham.

The tableaux undoubtedly contain messages for Graham and she must extract from Crawford what the FBI and Graham believe those messages are.

Du Maurier still ponders what exactly to tell Agent Crawford. She needs to paint Hannibal as unstable in broad bold strokes. Impress upon Agent Crawford how despondent he has become over the last year. Not that Hannibal had given her much choice, but she has resumed her role as his therapist and until recently, he had given her no cause to upset the status quo. She will let Crawford know that she is willing to help on her terms. The window of opportunity to apprehend Hannibal is small. Once she allows the FBI to take her into custody, she ceases to become an asset, an inside source of information.

Crawford will not like it, but he will agree.

The bitterness remains on her tongue though the wine pools there and her thoughts turn to their last evening together. Hannibal left messages with her as well. Hannibal does not merely engage in sex. Like one of his meals, it is an experience to be savored, it is an exercise in control and dominance and like everything Hannibal does, the act was imbued with meaning. He consumes and his tastes became far too rarefied for Du Maurier to accommodate, as he intended. They had quickly graduated from the usual established boundaries. Hannibal had deliberately changed the dynamic and in her own home. Upon reflection, Du Maurier believes his actions actually had less to do with Graham than she had initially thought. Hannibal has been invigorated by the chase for him. He revels in the attention it brings.

Hannibal is also testing her.

Hannibal had believed it necessary to manipulate her emotions for the insight, especially since Graham is in town. She should have realized what Hannibal had been doing the other night. Too quickly she went for the knife. However, Hannibal likely suspected she keeps weapons. He is now aware she is capable of actual rather than simulated violence between them, and Du Maurier is at a loss as to what Hannibal may infer from that. Their relationship has grown static and she is forced to admit she has become complacent. Hannibal craves the challenge and the intimacy he shared with Graham.

And Hannibal often communicates his desires through action rather than word.

You…are not the goose, my dear, nor would I mistake you for him. But, neither are you a swan…not yet.

Not yet. What was he implying? Her fingers sail along the lip, mind drifting to Hannibal's former dining room as she lifts her glass and drinks deeply. Change and transformation are among the themes of human existence that fascinate him most. Another Boucher hangs in the dining room in Impruneta to replace the one he left in Baltimore. She understands his insistence on the print in the dining room and she knows the significance the print holds for Hannibal with regard to his relationship with Graham. Hannibal thinks himself Zeus. Transforming himself as he moves among mortals. Zeus often strayed from Hera. But Hera grounded Zeus, always brought him back, infuriated and angry but he came. Is Du Maurier his Hera?

She thinks of other myths. Hera dispatched her rivals, often ruthlessly. Hannibal cannot resist Graham. He despises his weakness for him. Hannibal had ignored her advice as his psychiatrist in Baltimore to his own undoing. And hers. The towel slips to the floor as Du Maurier stretches at the table to run her fingers through her damp fragrant tresses. She sees the encounter for what it was and disappointment lifts from her chest like the heavy chain it was.

This is Hannibal's way of seeking her assistance again and he unwittingly plays right into her hands this time. A game of chess requires the sacrifice of pawns and neither she nor Hannibal has difficulty making those choices. But Graham is no pawn to Hannibal. He has become a unique piece on the board and a piece Hannibal is loath to part with. He requires Du Maurier to play Hera and remove Graham because he cannot do it himself. He will resent her for it of course, but their relationship is not based in traditional values or defined in traditional terms. She is not yet the swan because she has not behaved as one.

If you would be a swan, then let me see the swan, know the swan. My bed has room for only one other, Bedelia.

Just as Hannibal's own peculiar values would not permit him to take from her more than she was willing to give, neither would his immense ego permit him to admit his weakness to her. But he had done the next best thing.

You did ask that I take off my suit for you…

Hannibal has taken off his suit for everyone. Graham continues to hold the allure of the forbidden fruit and Hannibal continues to climb up the ladder for it. Du Maurier can play Hera for Hannibal and let him fall from his ladder still grasping the fruit in his hands. Or, she can kick the ladder out from beneath him.

Du Maurier sets down her glass, at last prepared to call Jack Crawford. After all, Hannibal asked her to.

Daniel stares out from the window, mercifully closed and the air conditioning set to its highest setting. The sweat is finally dry upon his skin though his shirt clings to his back and chest cool and damp. He had peeled off his blazer as soon as Alia had unlocked her car, parked on a side street a couple blocks from the Uffizi. Alia drives a route along the Arno, and though it is a bit out of their way, they are at least removed from the congested piazzas and crowds. Most of the locals are on holiday, leaving their city in the able hands of the enterprising Florentines to handle the invasion of foreigners that descend every summer. Not all Florentines cater to the call of tourism.

“How late do you think Agent Crawford will keep Will?”

Alia turns into traffic heading for the exit that will take them north and west to Fiesole. She drives her own car, not a Polizia vehicle. The flirty and amorous behavior she had exhibited in the museum has vanished, replaced by the grittier demeanor Daniel remembers from their first encounter when he had rescued Will from a trip to the precinct. She is edgy and Daniel suspects the sharp dread he feels from her has something to do with the phone resting in the console beside her. Her eyes cannot wander far from it.

“You would have a better idea than I would. I guess Crawford will keep him as long as Will lets him. But since Crawford has been there all day, got in there much earlier than Will, I hope Crawford wants to leave soon.” Daniel says.

“Did he find what he was looking for in the Uffizi?”

“Are you asking as concerned friend or as a cop?”

“*Merda*! How quickly you turn on me.”

“You offered.” Daniel says and he does not soften his words with a smile.

He has not felt much like smiling since Will had hung up the phone. The feeling that Will’s intended destination was not the Piazza Repubblica sticks like a wedge between his ribs. He has become acclimated to the diazepam in his system and his head no longer floats as though on a cloud. Its effects had begun to wear off while walking along the halls of statues. He had not been able to shake the feeling of being watched and though he knows paranoia can be a side effect of diazepam, he thinks the dose he took far too small to account for the feelings. At least the feelings of dread about Will are manageable and not overwhelming.

He feels like he can keep his perspective and his wits about him now.

“I am always a cop, Daniel. Will understands. I have to do my job, but I can’t help if I don’t have an idea of what he’s doing or where he is going. And you do.”

“Doctor patient confidentiality. And Alia…no offense, but there is nothing in your experience that could help you figure him out.”

“I’m not offended, but I don’t think you have figured him out either.”

Daniel thinks she is probably correct. As familiar as Daniel has become with Will’s’ mind and his dreamscapes, Will is still capable of misleading him if he wanted to. There is, however, no reason to confirm for Alia that is a possibility.

"If Will told you to be a cop, then that *is* the kind of help he is counting on. He can anticipate Lecter's next move better than anyone so follow your instincts."

"I don't want him to get hurt."

"He knows you don't. Neither do I. Maybe doing your job will prevent that."

Although Alia has been tense with anticipation, the beep of her phone still manages to surprise her. She glances at Daniel once before picking it up. She huffs and takes Pazzi's call.

"*Ciao, Capo…"*

Daniel listens to Alia relate to her boss where she has been this afternoon and her reasons for accompanying Will to the Uffizi. It is evident from her defensive attitude and punctuated use of expletives that Pazzi is not giving her an easy time of it.

"Yeah…" She says, rolling her eyes as she steps on the gas, "I'm driving to Fiesole right now…to keep an eye on him, yes. Will…Mr. Graham…oh fuck it, yes…he asked me to. I can stay with *Daniel* as long as you need…why? What? When? Is he….? *Maledizione…merda! Si…ciao."*

The dread Daniel was feeling cranks up several notches to full blown alarm. His first and only thought is that Hannibal had been at the museum and had encountered Will. By the look on Alia's face, he is certain the bad news is Hannibal related, as though there were any other kind.

"What happened?"

"Will was attacked by Paolini it looks like. He's…okay, but the Paolini are dead and it looks like he had…help."

"Lecter?"

"Fits the description given by witnesses. They are still at the crime scene, some alley offVia delle Farine. Will won't talk to him."

"He'll only talk to Crawford. Ah…fuck. He's going to be awhile. I guess you are my security detail for the evening."

"And Pazzi is not thrilled by that either. You know what happened, don't you?"

"Without more information, I don't know." Daniel thinks, hating how he hates to be right.

"Oh, yes you do. The Paolini were following one, or both of them. One thing led to another. Obviously, self-defense."

"A tough sell for a serial killer to claim self-defense."

"Which killer would you be referring to?" Alia raises her brow at the surprised look from Daniel as his head jerks up to gaze into the dark brown eyes trained on his face. "Because my boss thinks we are dealing with two."

Du Maurier does not have to wait long for Crawford to take her call. The deceptively obtuse and gregarious FBI agent has likely been on pins and needles waiting for her to contact him. He should be eager to hear what she has to say and his desperation should be sufficient that he not question her, too much.

“Doctor Du Maurier…or do you go by a different name now?” Crawford’s voice sounds affable enough.

“Very direct, Agent Crawford. I think I will retain my current identity a little longer, given my proximity to the other doctor you seek.”

“Are you…in any danger by this proximity?” Jack asks but already relieved by Du Maurier’s confident tone.

“Not at the present, but that may change.”

“Which is why you finally decided to call? We had an agreement.”

“Our agreement was conditional. In my opinion, the conditions did not qualify.”

“Until now.”

“That would be correct.”

“What have you been doing with him for the past year? You have been with him since he left Baltimore, haven’t you?”

“For the most part. I am not able to stray very far, a fact I learned very quickly.”

“Before we talk any further I need to ask you to explain the nature of your relationship with him.”

“Of course. I was and remain his therapist. Hannibal can become…attached to individuals, all part and parcel of his particular proclivities and pathology. After Baltimore, he decided that I should reconsider treatment and resume my role as his therapist. He was…very persuasive.”

“And your current…assessment of him?”

“Currently, he is preoccupied with revenge. The victims are members of a family hired to kill him?”

“That is actually the case. He told you?”

“He was very pleased with himself. I have no idea about the particulars of his…handling of them, nor do I desire to. It was enough that he claimed the credit.”

Jack notes her choice of words. He thinks it curious to boldly infer she believes Hannibal may not have acted alone to him. If, that is what she is doing. He is not sure what those blonde hairs at the crime scenes mean, but Du Maurier is more deeply involved than what she would have him believe.

“No, he does have a certain…flair for the dramatic. I’m still a bit confused why you couldn’t contact me before now, while things were quiet. That would seem the best opportunity to apprehend him.”

“There are certain advantages to our association. And you were unable to guarantee the quality of life to which I am accustomed. Why would I choose to allow the FBI to disrupt my life again only to have you fail, again. I would be in an even worse situation.”

“Because Hannibal would know who had turned him in. And you believe we can’t protect you.”

“I am in a position to keep you apprised, Agent Crawford. Our association must be on my terms. If Hannibal suspects, well, I think you have some idea of what he is capable of.”

“I certainly do. Maybe we will be successful this time, since you are taking a more active role in his apprehension.”

“I cannot consider protective custody if I am to assist. Once I come to you, my value and assistance is finished, if not irretrievably compromised.”

“Agreed. He knows enough about how we work already. But things are different this time.””

“Are they? I tried to tell you before. If you think you are about to catch him, it is because he wants you to think that.”

“I remember what you said.”

“You remember, but you did not listen. You brought Will Graham here.”

“No one knows Hannibal better. I need him.”

“Do you? Mr. Graham is damaged beyond repair for what Hannibal did to him. Do you trust him?”

“I have my reservations about Will. I have reservations about you, too. I don’t have to tell him about your association with Hannibal. I can allow him to work his angle while you work yours.”

“That…is a more efficient approach.”

“How do you think Will Graham’s presence here will affect Hannibal?”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On how long he has been here. And how long he remains within Hannibal’s sphere of influence.”

Casting more doubt on top of the doubt Crawford already carries about Graham serves to consolidate his evolving beliefs about what Graham is capable of. If Crawford suspects Graham capable of more capital offenses, he will be more willing to consider collusion with Hannibal. The more confused Crawford is about Graham’s loyalties, the better.

“Will is under surveillance. His contribution here is to profile, to anticipate what Hannibal might do next.”

“Do you think that wise? He was unable to predict Hannibal before. His mistake nearly cost him his life, and yours.”

“Will had good intentions. I believe he still does.”

“Will Graham remains an inseparable part of Hannibal’s psyche. Whatever emotional connection they have is profound. During the past year, Hannibal has behaved himself, but he is withdrawn and despondent. What transpired in Baltimore affected him deeply. Until the interference of these twins, he was managing his melancholia.”

“And now?”

“And now. He sees opportunity, Agent Crawford. You have brought Graham to him. He’s had time to reflect on all that has been lost. Will Graham is the individual responsible for that.”

“You had said you believed Hannibal was honestly trying to help Will. Help him become a killer, like himself?”

“I believe Hannibal saw a personality not unlike himself in Graham. Whether or not that is true is not at issue, that Hannibal believed it is. Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness and Hannibal has been very lonely.”

“And you believe Will is lonely, too?”

“Isn’t he? He is already possessed of a solitary nature and his association with the FBI has left him nothing but…alone.”

“And Will is aware of all of this. He has been aware all along.”

“Not initially. I believe his awareness of Hannibal’s influence was gradual, but once aware he knowingly engaged Hannibal, and he is here now prepared to engage him again.”

“You were talking about both of them in Baltimore. You believe Will was colluding with him then?”

“I cannot say for certain, but his willingness to put himself within Hannibal’s reach after what happened to him in Baltimore suggests that Hannibal may have been correct about him and…that Mr. Graham now concurs.”

“Will insisted he wanted to catch him. Will has to know how his own mind works.”

“I believe Hannibal recognized in him the potential to become a killer like himself. I think for a time Mr. Graham indulged those impulses Hannibal recognized to help catch him, for you. What he told himself I cannot say. He may have graduated to indulging those impulses for his own gratification.”

“Or, to attempt to snare Hannibal. He may want to avenge what Hannibal did to him.”

“Or thank him. Hannibal has been quiet, absorbed in his less violent hobbies and attempting to make a life for himself. He might have been content to do so indefinitely had these people not approached him.”

“And now?”

“Now I have no idea what he will do. I do know that if you care about Mr. Graham, you will not let him get too close to Hannibal.”

Jack thinks those words are going to haunt him the rest of his life, however long that might be.

"Fair enough. You don't think your association with Hannibal has influenced you? You did kill one of your patients under his influence."

"Yes, I did. And since then, my association with Hannibal has been…of a professional nature."

"A professional relationship does not exclude…an intimate one."

"No, it does not. Are you asking me if I am sleeping with him, Agent Crawford?"

"Are you?"

"Influence requires intimacy. If one's influence is to be effective, then intimacy becomes necessary. I'm sure Mr. Graham knows this and Hannibal…intimately."

Jack thinks he hears something akin to spite in Du Maurier's tone and wonders if she is aware or if she intended to carve out such provocative imagery for him. Jack considers something he would not be tempted to entertain prior to his association with Hannibal. Is it possible Du Maurier is competing with Will for Hannibal's…favor? Jack cannot even imagine what that favor would entail, except that murder is only part of it. Does Will see Du Maurier in that particular light?

Jack thinks he should talk to Will about Du Maurier some more and see where that imagination of his takes him. He returns his thoughts to Du Maurier. Jack needs a hair sample for comparison. Du Maurier should agree to a meeting if she is unaware of the evidence woven into the tableaux. If she is aware, she will not agree or will be difficult about it. Or, she may be colluding with Hannibal and the blonde hair is more misdirection. There is simply no way of knowing. He has to start with a comparison and go from there.

"If I could provide assurances, what conditions would you like to see in exchange for your cooperation?"

"Absolute immunity. And secure passage from Florence once you catch him. Should that happen, you would never hear from me again, Agent Crawford."

"You are still adverse to protective custody. Or witness protection."

"Quite. I see no reason to jeopardize the status quo absent complete compliance with those conditions."

"You are aware that I if I found you once, I could find you again."

"Unless you find Hannibal, I will not be found. Your choices are limited, Agent Crawford."

"I want Lecter. You know I want him. You don't leave me much choice because I am not entirely sure of Will's motives. If I can procure this in writing, I want to meet with you in person. A place of your choosing, but I want to see you, in person. To be sure you are even in Florence and not phoning in with Hannibal sitting beside you sharing a plate of tartare."

"Understood. I find your offer acceptable."

"How will I reach you?"

"You can leave messages with the number you have no doubt traced already. I will not pick up, but I will receive a call message. I will call you back."

“That is acceptable…Wait…can you hold a minute?”

Du Maurier sighs and pours more wine, about half a glass. She pauses and then makes it a full glass. Her conversation with Crawford has gone better than she expected. He was more cooperative and receptive than she had hoped. Which, of course, means he suspects her. Suspicion will cause Crawford to reconsider and reevaluate every decision he makes. He will question her motives and by extension, Hannibal’s and Graham’s. Awareness of one’s suspicions without being able to trust the source of those suspicions compounds one’s reasoning. Du Maurier can now implement the next phase of her plan.

“Doctor Du Maurier…something has come up and I have to attend to it. I can reach you at this number?”

“As I explained, yes.”

“Then goodbye until next time.”

“Agent Crawford…”

Du Maurier sets down the phone. The only thing that could come up for Crawford is Hannibal. She takes the glass of wine in hand and walks to the living room. She switches on the tv as she sinks into the pristine white sofa and thinks it fortuitous she already poured a generous full glass. With a wry smile and focused gaze she flips through the channels, and her celebratory mood vanishes with the evening news report of bodies found behind Di Constanza’s deli.

The metal blade of the knife had gleamed as Will had wrapped his fingers around its studded hilt, allowing the oils and sweat from his palm to seep into the scratches adorning its smooth polished surface to mingle with evidence from other crimes Will could only guess. Thankfully, the Paolini’s knife is similarly serrated as Hannibal’s. He had been kneeling over the body of his victim, leaving Hannibal’s victim untouched, when the Polizia had arrived, emerging from the back door of the deli, predictably, with weapons raised, fingers hooked in the triggers.

Will had dropped the knife and raised his hands slowly over his head.

“*Sulle tue ginocchia…”* Will had sunk slowly to his knees, already knotting his fingers together behind his neck.

He had endured the staring from the locals who had begun to come outside to have a gander at the gore, collecting at their windows like cockroaches come out of the walls. Within minutes of the arrival of the first Polizia on the scene, several other officers had arrived, and leading the third group had been Pazzi himself. Will had known then that he wasn’t going to see Jack for a long while. But, all this would allow Hannibal time to escape…as usual.

Cool metal had settled on his skin, an unpleasantly familiar slice of the surreal as the Polizia officer had snapped the cuffs snugly about his wrists. He had looked up at Pazzi from where he still knelt on the pavement. It had seemed to Will that every time he and Hannibal get together it is he who continues to be the one who ends up in handcuffs. Or a hospital.

“Gotten yourself into a bit of a mess, Graham?” Pazzi’s mouth had wrung to the side as he had slipped a cigarette between his lips, his expression leaving no doubt he had been as pleased as punch. “Somehow I’m not surprised.”

Will had gazed at the smoke drifting, hanging in the humid air like tendrils about Pazzi’s face that had loomed over him. Will had held his gaze and had said but two words and nothing more. “Jack Crawford.”

“Of course…” Pazzi had blown smoke into his face. “Search him.”

He had been vaguely aware of going through the motions of his arrest as his mind had retreated from the warm curious bodies shrouded in the shadows, from the dank and cramped confines of the backseat, and from the persistent taunting of Pazzi on the drive to the Polizia precinct. Pazzi had stubbornly refused to call Crawford from the courtyard, preferring to force the FBI to meet him on his turf. Will had left the pissing in the sand to the people who believed they were in control of what was happening.

Will had recreated the altercation in his imagination, going over every detail as he had remembered it. As his body and mind had adjusted to the transition from courtyard to car, he had contemplated the awesome sense of power he had experienced that frightens and seduces him still. His mind had processed impressions like instantaneous snapshots in his head and his heart and limbs had been synchronized, entirely at his command. He could have stayed his hand beneath the young man’s ribcage, held it there, the damage done and death imminent. But he had wanted to open him up, had wanted to see the viscera spill and he had taken the knife lower, ripping through the layers of muscle and tissue and slicing through liver, stomach and spleen to sever the large intestine, halting finally to allow gravity and the tug of the blade to draw the entrails out.

He had wanted Hannibal to see him doing it.

He had wanted to toss aside the knife and wring what breath remained from this man, this pathetic creature who might have killed him, with his hands wrapped tightly around the man’s throat so he could have felt life leave him in a desperate pulsing beneath his fingers, a heartbeat at a time. See the spark depart from his eyes, watch his pupils dilate as he had watched Randall’s shift from life to lifelessness.

The young Paolini’s fingers had scrawled helplessly across his abdomen, eyes wide as pain too terrible to describe had consumed him. He had whined in shock and agony as his bowels had seeped bloody and warm between fingers already becoming numb. The power over life and death had indeed been intoxicating. Will had been all too aware that he could have suffered the same fate at Hannibal’s hands. With that awareness had been the realization that for all his anger and hatred, for all the vindictiveness, for all the supreme gratification he must have felt at delivering his punishment; Hannibal had experienced, perhaps to his surprise, another emotion even more powerful. That emotion is the only reason Will lives.

Watching the primal efficiency with which Hannibal had taken down the other Paolini had been mesmerizing. The entire scene had felt scripted, and Will supposes that from Hannibal’s perspective that is precisely how it felt. Anticipating is what Hannibal does, and is only one of his many talents. Nearly severing a head with one stroke is another.

As Will had watched Hannibal take up position to stand at the center of the courtyard from his hiding place in the alley he had realized that Hannibal had offered to Will his only weapon. *How* he had offered the blade had left Will wondering just how inadvertent, if at all, its presentation had been. Will thinks it highly unlikely presenting the blade first had been an…oversight.

Hannibal had deliberately summoned associations for Will, his way of helping Will through any residual trauma from their last encounter, while acknowledging that his thoughts also remained fixated on the deed he cannot undo. Will had felt the intensity of those luminous dark eyes burrow into his, eliciting a twinge across his stomach that had tightened into a knot. The image of Hannibal's eyes had remained and had threatened to eclipse even the arrival of the footsteps echoing off the walls as Will had crouched in the shadows.

That Hannibal wrestles with similar doubts about Will's intentions as he wrestles with his own doubts is comforting in its own way. Each of them constantly wracked with doubt about the other, neither knowing with any degree of certainty where they had stood and now stand with each other. Will's emotional responses to all that Hannibal has done, to him and to everyone else, has ceased to be his primary source of torment.

As he had sat staring at the cracks in the wall of another cell, perched on the edge of yet another slim and dirty mattress, the loneliness had throbbed in his chest and burned behind his eyes. He had heard the scrape of talons announcing the arrival of his constant companion from the depths of his inferno and had noticed the subtle shift in the shadows of his cell as the creature had assumed its watchful presence. He had receded again into his own memory palace of sorts, though he had noted that his palace contains hardly any memories of the dogs and Wolf Trap anymore. The aching reserved for those things has become less pronounced because although his misses them deeply, and the life they represent, he knows he cannot go back there. He cannot go *back*…anywhere. He cannot even manage to summon his beloved stream.

A stream may wait for him somewhere, but it will not be the stream of his memories. Will had thought of his conversation with Hannibal at his office while they had fed his carefully kept notebooks into the fireplace. He had told Hannibal that all he had needed was a stream, a wistful tugging at his lips had surfaced as he had thought how concentrated his own memory palace was, not so vast as Hannibal's but no less afflicted with cracks and imperfections. Will's memory palace takes him to either his solitary existence in Wolf Trap with his dogs or to Hannibal's residence in Baltimore. That's it. Hannibal's home is as much a part of Will's existence as Hannibal's.

They had retired upstairs after their supper, their last supper of succulent rack of *ribs* and exquisite glass after glass of Bordeaux. Will had narrowly avoided the salon where Hannibal had started with his tumbler and hearing Will's footsteps creaking along the stairs, had turned to observe Will already half way up, leaning against the banister dangling his tumbler over the side. He had taken a slow sip from the crystal, considering Will from the bottom of the steps. His eyes had swept over Will and he had nodded his assent with lips pressed together, the mellow burn of whiskey still warm upon his tongue.

A flicker of alarm should have registered at Hannibal's complete acquiescence, but Will had been relieved to see Hannibal follow, had seen the patient curve of a smile as he had raised his glass to him and had mistaken what had actually been resignation for the indulgence he had come to expect from Hannibal. Upstairs, Will had enjoyed other final pleasures with Hannibal, each of them pretending not to notice how every touch had been imbued with sadness, evident in the lingering of each pass of fingers or tongue or lips.

Afterward, Will had pushed Hannibal's hand away from where it had lain across his stomach, not incidentally Will has since decided, and becoming aware of the time he had spent languishing in satin and sweat, Will had sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He had been prepared to pull back on his clothes from beside the bed where he had tossed them, deliberately, causing

Hannibal's lips to tighten and his face wrinkle in playful warning, an expression only he could provoke. Movement from Hannibal had caused him to pause.

Is it difficult to imagine falling asleep here and awakening in another place in another world? Hannibal had asked.

Hannibal had pushed off the mattress to rest on his elbows, blankets draped low so that every muscle from shoulders to the dark thatch of hair gathered below his navel was exposed in the firelight. His smooth features had rippled in contemplation as he had observed Will glance up at him, boxers in hand as he had prepared to stand.

Will had always felt that awakening in Hannibal's bed had felt like waking to another world, but Will had been curious about the thoughts that had prompted the musing gleam in Hannibal's eyes. He had looked down at Hannibal, his fingers playing along the elastic band of his shorts.

You seem enthused at the prospect of starting over someplace else, almost…pleased. Will had said, still gazing into the dark eyes that had seemed to be looking through him, into him.

I do not shy from what has to be done. I would rather not leave. This is my home, my practice, my life, but I would leave all of it, will leave, because of you.

Will had swallowed a tremulous knot at the sincerity and had not doubted Hannibal had meant every word. And he had. Just not quite the way Will had imagined.

Change is – has been difficult…for me. Will had said.

Your gift for understatement is second only to your wit.

Will had laughed softly, emotions tugging at him from every direction; his moral compass had spun out of control.

Hannibal had tilted his head to the side, thoughtful in repose; *Transitions are difficult, especially for you. As your piano playing suggests…*

Hannibal had reached across the bed for him then, his fingers grasping the thin cotton of his boxers to pull at them gently so that Will had let them slip from his hands to lie upon the carpet again.

All the things we have ever said to each other, in those chairs at my office, and here…

Our orchestrations of carbon, yes?

That melody you hear… an unfinished symphony, the ink still wet.

Will's eyes had flickered with amusement, and sadness. He had felt the tide of impending loneliness rising, too. Each of them had known that their universe was about to unravel. But, Will had scooped up his boxers from the floor and had slipped one foot and then the other inside, had risen slowly from the edge of the bed to pull them up acutely aware of Hannibal's gaze. The urge to flee had been as equally strong as the impulse to stay. But, Will had believed all had been set in motion, had believed that one way or another, they had passed the road of redress, there was no turning back and no reason to wallow in the wishes of what might have been.

I don't need a sacrifice, do you?

I need him to know…

To the truth then. And all its consequences.

He had finished dressing and had leaned over the bed to brush his lips across Hannibal's forehead, breathing into damp blonde locks, *And I have many miles to go before I sleep.* Will had said.

He had walked from the bedroom and down the stairs, down the hall through the kitchen, opened the back door and then, had stepped into the night when he had finally taken breath again. He had probably walked right past Abigail, drugged and asleep behind one of those doors Hannibal always kept locked. The next time he would see Hannibal would be when he turned from the confused and terrified Abigail to stare into the pain filled eyes and rueful smile he sees with perfect clarity every time he dreams.

Occasionally, I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor. On purpose.

How many lies have had to be sanctified? How many consciences devastated?

As many as were necessary.

You sacrificed Abigail.

Hannibal had sacrificed Abigail, again. He had shattered his teacup on purpose. In Hannibal's mythical universe, a sacrifice had been necessary to win the favor of the gods to set the storm upon the sea and send wind to the sails of the fleet bound for Troy. How many teacups must Will shatter before he can escape from his inferno?

Will knows what kind of crazy he is. He knows he is a killer. What kind of killer is he? He thinks his particular pathology points to what Hannibal has referred to as the anticipation of regret. He had felt nothing approaching regret with the Paolini. Hannibal does know Will's mind. Hannibal can anticipate Will's anticipation of regret. And he can anticipate the lack of it.

Hannibal already knows what kind of killer Will is. He told Will what kind of killer in his tableau. He had a purpose for the tableaux beyond ensuring his complicity. Hannibal has once again showed Will the negative so Will could see the positive. Will shakes his head and chews on his lip, the taste of the saliva in his mouth as bitter as the smile that emerges. Will is a killer with a heart.

Everything Hannibal does is on purpose. His designs so intricate that each action ripples, flowing into next, a ripple within a ripple within a ripple. And each ripple has a purpose. As Will had shuffled through his memoires, the ripples had become a pattern in his mind, like a measure of notes played over and over. A singular melody. Orchestrations of carbon, ripples upon the sea.

By the time he had heard the automatic lock buzz and click at the end of the corridor, he had come to the decision that he has had enough of imagining, of anticipating what Hannibal might do. There are plenty of teacups to be shattered. On purpose. He had looked up at Jack and a thin smile had rippled across his face.

Jack had stood huffing in exasperation, a large white bag at his side. His expression had soured at the sight of Will, still wearing his blood stained clothes, but had waved release papers at him from the other side of the bars.

"They said they had processed you. I expected to see you in a jump suit."

“They lied.” Will had known then that the Polizia had not dropped their investigation. Even for the FBI.

“I should just walk you out of here… I uh…brought some clothes.”

“Thanks.”

“You better hope I don’t get used to seeing you behind bars, Will.”

Will had raised his brows but had made no comment as the guard had unlocked his cell and had directed them upstairs...back to processing. Jack had ground his teeth, fingers clenching the papers in his hand, but had said nothing. Jack had been annoyed as hell about having to wait, but he had not been annoyed that Will was being processed. Quite the contrary. If the Polizia had not, the FBI would have and Jack would rather Will be frustrated with the Polizia than with him.

Jack had waited with arms folded across his chest while Will had let the Polizia tech take samples from under his fingernails. He had stood still while the tech had combed through his hair, ears, and nostrils, chasing the loosened particles with a sheet of waxed paper. The Polizia were putting on quite a show for the FBI. Their thoroughness had taken another hour.

Finally, Will had stripped down in an exam room standing on more waxed paper in front of Jack and another Polizia officer, feeling the heat of two pairs of eyes on the scar stretching across his midrift as yet another officer had taken photos. He had handed off Daniel’s shoes, suit and shirt, even boxers, clothes Daniel would never see again, and had watched the Polizia officer stuff them into an evidence bag. As awkward as the ordeal had been, Will had been grateful Jack had been there. Jack had not trusted the Polizia any more than Will.

Once the officer had left, Jack had presented the large white plastic bag containing clothes for him. Will had pulled the articles from the swank clothier shop and noted the tags were still attached. The button down shirt and trousers were plain, but he had blinked at the silk boxers and looked up at Jack from the price tag. Jack had shrugged had said something about there had not been a lot to choose from and had looked to the ceiling while Will had slipped them on. Jack had guessed his size appreciatively well; even the leather sandals had fit. Will had paused at finding a comb in the bottom of the bag, but had run it through the curls anyway since Jack had taken the time to purchase it.

Jack had remained silent as Will had collected his wallet and phone from the manila folder thrust at him by the officer at the main desk, his brown eyes never leaving Will’s face.

He had followed Jack out of the Polizia precinct and had climbed in front of Jack into the backseat of a shiny black FBI Mercedes to find Pazzi already seated and leaning against the window. Will had scooted to the middle and had endured the uncomfortable silence all the way to Piazza Repubblica. They had trudged up steps cracked with age to FBI headquarters above the mall of shops and cafes that comprised the ground level of the surrounding colonnades running along either side of the grand arch.

Once inside, Jack had left Pazzi pacing outside his office suite and had shuttered the blinds. The respite from Jack’s disapproving glare had proved short-lived however as Jack had spent the next several minutes venting and berating Will from behind a desk already cluttered though barely in the office an entire day. Will faces Jack across his cluttered desk, and notes a file with his name on it sits on top of dozens of others.

Jack takes a breath, places his hands flat on his desk and leans over it. He knows Pazzi paces outside his door and Jack does not care if he wears the carpet bare. He looks at Will in the chair, expression blank and eyes distant and he knows Will has not heard a single thing he just said. It occurs to Jack that Will might still be recovering, processing from his attack. Not for the first time, he peers into the young handsome face and thinks it remarkable that the emotional toll of all he has been through does not register in the smooth features, but seems to concentrate in his eyes.

Jack has to play his hand carefully with Will if he is to ascertain with some certainty the direction he should take next. Jack believes Will had killed in self-defense, but the claim of defense does not begin to explain the brutality. Jack knows this is what has the Polizia, and Pazzi, up in arms. And, there is the fact that Will clearly had not killed both of the Paolini. The circumstances surrounding *that* are what Jack wants to know.

It is only because Lecter is the prime suspect as Will's accomplice that Jack had been able to convince the Polizia to cooperate and cut Will loose. Will is not going to like the conditions of his release either.

The attack this afternoon may very well alter Jack's plans regarding security for Will and Clayton. The Polizia may insist on keeping him under surveillance and call it protection. Jack thinks it might be better to assign the FBI to Will. But that would leave a trail back to him if Jack were to pull the detail off him. Jack had intended to do exactly that. He has no other way of figuring out what Will intends to do. He might be able to convince Will to confide in him if has something to negotiate with, like calling off the dogs.

Jack considers it might actually be better to allow the Polizia to babysit. If Will's loyalties are confused, again, the Polizia can deal with the fallout. If Will wants to lose his security detail, Jack thinks Will capable of outwitting the Polizia. And again, they would be the ones responsible for losing him and Jack remains free and clear. And if Will believes Jack is sheltering him from the Polizia, then he might be inclined to share his thoughts with him. No phone calls from Purnell.

He will hear from her at some point. Interpol will notify Quantico of today's events and Jack will have to account for his unpredictable profiler, again.

Will sits across from Jack, his back pressed firmly against the cushioned back, feet on the floor, legs open slightly and hands folded in his lap. Images of similar *conversations* with Jack at Quantico stream through his skull, as the same dull and desensitized haze descends. Will knows Jack sits right in front of him, he can hear him, but his eyes aren't seeing Jack right now.

He sees the eviscerated corpse at his feet and the admiring gleam in Hannibal's eyes and relishes the intense satisfaction that radiates still. Hannibal had been utterly elated with his own kill, the pride beaming from his eyes as he had muttered *magnificent* into the silence of the courtyard. Will is not sure if Hannibal had been referring to himself, to Will, or if he had been simply expressing his joy over their first joint kill together in a general way.

"What happened out there?" Jack says softly.

Will blinks at the change in the sound of Jack's voice. The smell of new clothes, the crispness of the fabric draws his attention away from the large brown eyes that linger over his face.

"What do you think happened?"

"No, no, no. Don't you start that business."

Jack slams his fist on the pile of folders and the dull thud is clearly not the sound he expected. He shoves the pile aside and takes a long cleansing breath. He waves his finger at Will instead.

“The release for you is provisional and extracting this arrangement took some doing just so you *appreciate* the razor thin line I am treading right now. For you.”

Will shifts in his chair, his posture conveying to Jack the apology and gratitude he expects without having to articulate words that Jack likely finds meaningless, if not insincere, at this point.

“Jack…I do appreciate your position. My presence here is disruptive to the investigation. I invite chaos. There will be a next time.”

“Yes, there will. And that is the main reason the charges against you have been…put on hold.”

“So I’m wanted in two countries now, just like Hannibal.”

“Are you?”

“What?”

“Just like Hannibal?”

Will lifts his head, allows his eyes to soften, to project the sting that Jack imagines at least hopes his words inflicted. “What do you think happened out there, Jack?”

Jack reads the wound in Will’s eyes, the set of his jaw. The pained flicker is quick, there and then gone and Will is once again stone faced.

“I think you should tell me what happened. We can keep what you tell me between the two of us, at least for a while or you give me reason to tell them. The Polizia can run with what they’ve got. I’ll do what I can, but…”

Jack lets the unspoken words hang in the air with all the other unspoken thoughts sitting on the event horizon of chaos that Jack must surely sense. Will knows Jack can’t protect him. He doesn’t expect him to. He is, in fact, counting on Jack to trust his instincts.

“I realized I was being followed. By one, didn’t see the other one. I ducked in the deli out the back, and waited. I drew him out, Jack. I didn’t wait for him to attack me. I had him on the ground and his partner, relative…” Will waves a hand in the air, “…whatever comes out of another alley. And this is where it gets surreal.”

“Hannibal.”

“Yes. He had apparently been following, tracking them. Saw what was happening and intervened. He took out the other one. We exchanged looks, meaningful glances I suppose and he took off when we heard the sirens.”

“No words exchanged between you?”

“Yes, there were words, Jack.” Words Will has no intention of telling Jack.

“Not in the mood to share.” Jack says, looking for any glimmer of emotion in those pale blue eyes and sees none.

“Not really. I’d rather not add fuel to the fire the Polizia want to light under me.”

“Okay. I’ll let that go for now. You didn’t exchange anything else?”

“Like what?” Will says, appearing indignant.

Jack pauses, thinks Will clearly misinterpreted his inquiry as innuendo. He sighs knowing how unreliable witness statements can be and he is fully aware of how badly he wants to continue thinking that. He decides to give Will the benefit of explaining himself.

“Like a knife.”

“I took out my phone, but I never used it.”

Jack notes the non-answer but he lets that go too. “About the phone…you encoded it with a password.”

“I did. Didn’t want Pazzi scrolling through my life.”

“Calls between you and his detective, I suppose?”

Will allows a tight smile, “I don’t have much of a life, Jack. And I don’t want her getting in trouble for…being friendly.”

Jack nods. Will sits biting at his lip, looking as tired and used up as Jack feels. Jack can’t imagine what Will had been feeling at seeing Hannibal. He knows what he would feel. But Jack would have been armed, might have shot him on the spot on principle. Will had not been armed. He had been under attack and facing Hannibal in a dark alley unarmed would be nothing less than a harrowing experience.

Jack rubs at his temples, presses his fingers into the flesh in a vain attempt to halt the throbbing of blood vessels against his scalp. Nothing is ever simple with Will.

Even under duress, Will had somehow wrestled the knife away from his attacker. Not an impossible feat knowing Will. Jack reminds himself he does not know Will. Perhaps he never has. For all he knows, Will and Hannibal had met up at the Uffizi, had themselves a glass of wine before making a mess of the Paolini.

“Why did you rip him apart, Will? A stab to the chest would have incapacitated him. You didn’t have to…”

“Cut him lengthwise like a slaughtered side of beef?”

“Is that what you did?”

“The mindset, Jack. Automatic, like instant recall. My body remembered…” Will stops, lets the words accumulate on the event horizon that sucks them up like oxygen into the chaos.

Jack finds that admission entirely believable. Every killer Will has ever profiled is locked in a fort in his skull. And Hannibal let everyone one of them out. “At what point did Hannibal step in?”

“I’m not certain about that. I heard the other one yelling from the alley and when I looked up from the one on the ground, Hannibal was already there. He took him down immediately, used his own knife to kill him. It was…brutal, elegant, and quick. Seemed like it anyway."

Will stops, allows the admiration in his tone to settle with Jack. Jack would be expecting Will to identify with Hannibal. He has been empathizing with him for two years.

"I'm…not well, Jack. That's why…"

"You're in therapy. With Clayton. Does he really know what he's gotten himself mixed up in?"

"I think he thinks he does. But so did we."

"So, Hannibal was hunting the Paolini…from where do you think?"

"I was on my way back here from the Uffizi. Somewhere along the way."

"Or from the Uffizi."

"I didn't see them or Hannibal there, but it's possible. They know headquarters is here. They wouldn't have allowed me to get much farther before making a move."

"How did you notice them?"

"Shop window. He looked like Luciano."

"Why do you think Hannibal…jumped in, put himself at risk? Is that what you talked about?"

"No. He plays head games. There is a natural response of reciprocity, of gratitude involved here. I think it was to confuse and well, I am confused."

"Or maybe he was making amends. Maybe he had been following you, not the Paolini."

"There is that…"

"Are you back in bed with Hannibal?"

"You mean that figuratively, right?"

"I don't know what I mean right now. This is a mammoth clusterfuck."

"The sexual metaphors are wearing thin, Jack."

"Sorry. Whether he wants to kill you and eat you, or something else…doesn't matter…"

"It um…matters to me."

"What I mean is we can use that."

"You mean, use me."

Jack winces at the forlorn smile Will offers. The guilt over his less than generous thoughts about Will over the last few days eats at him. His conversation with Du Maurier was the icing on a very toxic cake. He thinks of the antacids in his drawer and stifles the urge to chomp down a handful.

"Let's let things settle down. I have to ask Pazzi to join us, but I'll make it short. It's late."

“What do we have to discuss with him?”

“Your security arrangements and how your provisional release is going to work.”

“Are you placing me under Pazzi’s jurisdiction?”

“I can’t…don’t have the bodies to spare. Besides, what if the Paolini go after you again?”

“It’s not a matter of if, Jack.” Will shifts in his seat, the trousers are itchy and he’s not sure if he is imagining it because of the black feathers peeking out from his shirt or because the office feels so warm. “So, he’s my immediate superior?”

Jack rolls his head and grins. “If you’d like to let him think that, go ahead.” Jack is gratified with the sigh and the nod from Will, “Look, I want Lecter alive. I don’t think the Polizia care either way. If Hannibal still has a…soft spot for you, then I want to exploit that to bring him in.”

“Are we fishing, or poaching, Jack?”

“I didn’t hear that.”

Will considers this and decides that Jack is using Pazzi, too. But, he is not lying when he says he wants Hannibal alive. Killing Hannibal outright would not be nearly as satisfying as watching him die a slow death incarcerated. Will frowns at the sins of omission that seem to spill all around with reckless abandon.

“Hannibal won’t be taken alive, Jack. He knows what will happen to him. He knows where he’ll end up and he would not suffer the indignity of sitting in Chilton’s basement.”

“What do *you* want, Will?”

“At the moment, all I want is to go home and take a shower.”

Jack rubs at his stubbly chin. He had fully expected Will to be evasive. Will has his own agenda with Hannibal and Jack has to admit, for any number of reasons. The only way Jack can learn what that agenda is, is to allow Will to set his plan in motion.

“I have not discussed the possibility of Du Maurier’s involvement.”

“Has she contacted you?”

“No.” Jack lies smoothly. “But when and if she does, I don’t want her to be accosted by the Polizia.”

“Understood.”

“I’m going to call him in now.”

“Should have sent him out for pizza while we were talking.” Will calls over his shoulder as Jack chuckles and opens the door.

“Captain Pazzi, thank you for waiting.”

“No problem. This won’t take too long I hope. I’m taking my wife to the opera this evening.”

"Ah," Jack says, "Which opera?"

"*La Belle Hélène*. Do you know it?"

Jack shakes his head and Pazzi shrugs, "Ah, well, I don't imagine you have much time for opera… or your wife."

Jack's jaw tightens slightly and he forces a smile, gesturing to the chair next to Will's.

"It's an operetta." Will says.

"Excuse me?" Pazzi says as he sinks into his chair.

"*La Belle Hélène.* Offenbach, French composer. It's actually more a burlesque than a real opera. This one is spoof on the Trojan War, a comedy about Helen and Paris. You are likely seeing an abbreviated version, outdoors."

Pazzi merely nods, brows furrowed in thought as he stares at Will.

"It hasn't been performed in its entirety since…like the Civil War. That…would be the American Civil War, 1860's."

Pazzi strokes the whiskers along either side of his mouth as he considers Will's upturned face and disingenuous smile. Jack slides back into his chair, biting his tongue in silent gratitude. Will has done what Jack thought was impossible. Stunning Pazzi to silence.

"Well, thank you for the unsolicited history lesson. I'm sure I'll enjoy it." Pazzi says after a moment.

"Not likely…" Will mutters as Pazzi turns his head to toss an annoyed look at Will before crossing his legs and turning to Jack all smiles.

"What's the status on Will's situation?"

Pazzi turns to Will, ignoring Jack for the moment and leans conspiratorially into Will's space. "You know, you really did a number on those two. I mean you tore your guy apart. I didn't think you had it in you, to be honest."

"Oh, it's in me." Will says as he watches Pazzi retreat back into his seat.

"As you are aware, there is the family to consider. If you care, Mr. Graham, the victims were Filippo and Bernardo Paolini. It's your word against the family's money. But you haven't said anything, Mr. Graham. Not to me."

"The family is a crime family and I while I understand they have a vested interest in crimes committed against their own, there are extenuating circumstances here." Jack says eyeing the drawer where the antacids rest beside the container of Excedrin.

"They will twist the law and hire lawyers. They will make a circus out of it. They have already lost two."

"Hannibal, four. Paolini, zero." Will says.

“Who’s side are you on?” Pazzi says, “You aren’t helping your case.”

“Actually, it’s Hannibal, three…” Will says, picking at the bottom of his sandals.

Pazzi looks to Jack. “So, it was his boyfriend.”

Jack catches the sidelong glance from Will and leans across his desk, eyes shifting between the two men who seem bent on insulting each other. If he allows it to continue Will will tear Pazzi apart, figuratively…

“Let’s just take a moment to chill, both of you.”

Jack waits until the both of them have painted pleasant smiles on their bearded faces.

“The Paolini can hire whomever they want. It’s the evidence that matters. If it was self-defense as Will has said…to me…and the evidence proves that, then the charges will be dropped. He is an acting agent for the FBI.”

“A very provisional agent, if that. I’m sorry, but it is unlikely charges will be dropped. You’ll have to stand trial here.” Pazzi nods at Will.

“You’ll have to get in line.” Will says.

“What?”

“He’s right. He has some…pending matters at home to answer for first.”

“I had no idea you were such a celebrity, Mr. Graham.”

“And I’m not even the star of the production. Just the opening act.”

“Can you explain why the Paolini are after you? If that is even what happened. What did happen?”

Jack raises a brow. He is certain Pazzi already knows, but he lets Pazzi run his mouth for Will. Will’s imagination is a powerful thing. Will has likely already figured Pazzi out and this makes Jack feel better. Will’s eye roll to Jack confirms it.

“Guess we’ll find out at the trial.” Will stops picking at his sandals and looks up at Jack. “I thought we were going to go over my provisional release and protection.”

“You don’t need protection. You have your guardian angel or devil watching over you. That’s why the Paolini want you. They have been informed Lecter has a crush on you. Let’s see…Mason Verger?”

“There was an incident back home. Part of Will’s cover at the time. It…didn’t work out as planned.”

“The FBI made a mistake?” Pazzi shakes his head.

Jack needs Pazzi’s cooperation. If the current discussion is any indication, Jack is reasonably sure that Pazzi will stick it to Will first chance he gets. Jack is fine with that. Pazzi will keep Will in line, or Will will run circles around him. Either way, Jack will get to Hannibal.

“It happens. I’m sure the Polizia has its share of…mistakes. Tell Will how the security works.”

“They’ll keep a discreet distance; neither you or Doctor Clayton will even know they are there. Plain clothes and armed. Clayton comes in here in the mornings and you can come in later through another entrance. Always wear the same clothes, or similar enough. Or, you can follow your leads, like you did at the museum today except without one of my detectives next time.”

“Seemed to work out well for everyone.” Will says.

“She is an asset I do not want compromised. Association with you will compromise her, if you haven’t already…compromised her.”

Jack clears his throat, “There’s no way of telling whether or not the Paolini know about Doctor Clayton.”

“Hard to tell. His presence so far seems undetected but he has a driver’s license, a well-established psychiatric practice near the Piazza di Santa Croce, where the statue of Dante is. It would not be difficult to find out about him, or where he lives.”

Jack is aware Will does not want a security detail around Clayton’s home. Pazzi believes Will is the second artist of the tableaux. Jack knows that Pazzi also has an agenda and Jack is willing to allow it. If Pazzi wants to tangle with Hannibal, Jack is inclined to let him. See where it goes and then if things go badly, wash his hands of it, let the Polizia take the heat for screwing up.

Will stretches his neck from side to side. He thinks he pulled a muscle in the fight this afternoon. He thinks the entire afternoon has lasted for days. It does not matter what, if any security detail they put on him. The charges do not matter either. The chaos draws ever closer and there is nothing Jack or Pazzi will be able to do to stop it. What they think is happening…is not happening.

“I have Clayton’s address in Fiesole. What is yours?” Pazzi takes out his phone.

“I think protection around Doctor Clayton’s residence will be sufficient.” Will looks to Jack and frowns his disapproval. Jack expects that, too.

“Why is that?”

“Because I am temporarily staying there. He *is* my psychiatrist.”

Pazzi manages to keep his mouth closed, but a smirk sneaks out regardless. Jack rolls his eyes. Pazzi knows better than to say anything and Jack feels the twinge of sympathy for Will having to sit there and endure Pazzi’s condescension. Pazzi would be well advised not to piss off someone who thinks about killing for a living.

Pazzi glances at his watch, “It’s ah getting late. Mr. Graham, you understand you have to have the protection after today. I may not appreciate your value, but you are an asset to the FBI. I will provide the discreet security and you will cooperate. It’s simple, *Siamo a posto?*”

“We’re good. Should I expect a protection presence tonight?”

“They probably won’t arrive until late. Just do what you usually do. You won’t even notice them, but do stay alert.”

“Oh, I’m alert alright. So, I can go?” Will looks to Jack who nods.

“Got a ride?”

Will slides his phone out of pocket, smiles at Pazzi. “Will have. Good night, Jack.” Will turns to Pazzi, “*Buona sera , allora.*”

“Buona sera, Mr. Graham.”

Pazzi taps his fingers to his forehead as Will walks out.He waits for the door to close completely before turning to Jack.

“You must be crazy allowing him to work with you on this. I had no idea…”

“He is crazy. I’m crazy. We’re all crazy. Soon, you’ll be crazy, too. Or dead.” Jack peers over his desk at the chagrined Pazzi.

“You are not kidding.”

“I never kid. Not about Hannibal Lecter.”

“Whatever happened in Baltimore with Mason Verger…your boy is mixed up in it.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“He has never told me. And neither has Verger. And he had his chance. More than once. So, I know he has an ax to grind with Lecter, and with Will. Will is aware that the Paolini work for Verger and that Verger has it in for him.”

“Seems to me to give Graham and his boyfriend…”

“Stop right there. Lecter had designs on Will, that is true, but don’t assume it works both ways. I know you think Will is involved with the tableaux but there is no evidence that he did. Absent that, we have to go with what we’ve got. Will needs to be able to operate in gray areas and I am willing to let him do that. If he is on the up and up, then we’ll have our killer.”

“And if he’s not?”

“Then, Will has to face the consequences for his actions and choices. I know you don’t like him but despite his abrasive personality, he is the best chance we’ve got of catching Lecter. He has plenty of reasons to get it right this time.”

“Then let’s give them their common enemy. See what shakes out. You think he’s your man. I think not. I can place a tail on him, or not. I can put protection at Clayton’s house, or not. Shifts get confused. It happens.”

“Then, *Siamo a posto,* Captain. *Buona sera* and enjoy the opera.” Jack smiles from his desk as Pazzi rises from his chair, a little stiffly Jack thinks.

“*Buona sera.*”

Pazzi swaggers out and Jack waits until the door shuts before he opens his drawer and grabs the Excedrin and the antacids. He pulls a bottle of Scotch from another drawer and pours the aged amber liquor into the empty coffee cup beside it. After he downs several of the white pills, he turns over the framed photograph of Bella from where it had lain, face down, on the shelf behind his desk. His thoughts travel to the quays of Venice and memories of Bella. Beautiful, beautiful Bella.

Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

Will returns to Fiesole where comfort and therapy entwine. Hannibal happily prepares for a long awaited dinner guest, strategizes with Roberta, and retreats to his memory palace…again.

“About that fence, Will.” Daniel ducks his head so he can look up at Will, stare into his face from below so Will can’t drop his gaze and avoid him. “You’ve already jumped off. This isn’t about that choice anymore. It’s about what to do now.”

“You know I’ve jumped and you are still sitting here. Why is that?” Will leans forward, presses his elbows onto the damp terrycloth over his knees. Daniel smells the bourbon warm and sweet from Will's lips. His nose is so close to those lips he can barely stand it.

“I’m still your therapist. You are still struggling.” Daniel pauses, “Not planning on killing and eating me are you?”

The pale blue eyes soften a little, as fingers rub across lips in mock consideration. “Killing you…no.” Will’s fingers find his mouth, thumbs circle the stubble over his lip and Daniel melts inside.

Damn him. “I should find this conversation beyond insane.” Daniel manages without smiling.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 68

Will returns to Fiesole where comfort and therapy entwine. Hannibal happily prepares for a long awaited dinner guest, strategizes with Roberta, and retreats to his memory palace…again.

Achilles and Patroclus, cropped image, Andre Durand Gallery

I answered him: 'If my wishes had been completely fulfilled, you would not have been separated, yet, from human nature, since, in my memory, the dear, and kind, paternal image of you is fixed, and now goes to my heart, how, when in the world, hour by hour, you taught me the way man makes himself eternal; and it is fitting my tongue should show what gratitude I hold, while I live…

I would make this much known to you: I am ready for whatever Fortune wills, as long as conscience does not hurt me. Such prophecies are not new to my ears: so let Fortune turn her wheel as she pleases, and the peasant wield his mattock.' At that, my Master, looked back, on his right, and gazed at me, then said: 'He listens closely, who notes it.'

Dante's *Inferno,* Canto XV (verses 79-99)

As Will slips the Euros from his wallet into the waiting hands of the cab driver memories of his first visit to Daniel's home erupt from a corner of his mind sending a cascade of images to fall like rain, descending like mist upon the crackling furnace of the inferno that burns inside, has been burning since he had slumped into the back seat and rubbed the sting from dry tired eyes that have seen too much today. But as pleasant as those associations are, his associations with Hannibal saturate his mind, conversations of destinies swimming in blood and emptiness. An emptiness that is becoming increasingly more difficult to ignore and the need to fill that well of loneliness is at least as deep as the well.

It would seem the blood continues to flow; a rolling river rising along the banks and Will knows it will swell into a sea. It always does.

A low heart rate is a true indicator of one's capacity for violence. Your design is evolving. Your choices affect the physical structures of your brain

Killing is changing the way I think.

Although the euphoria he had experienced earlier has since been dampened considerably, associations had continued to sprout and had somehow summoned fragments of the charred landscape of his dreams to surface and shimmer before his eyes though they had been open. When he had gazed out the window through half lidded eyes, hovering in that peculiar twilight between sleep and wakefulness, he had seen only smoldering embers fly past. And he had drifted thinking of red and white sails caught in a gale, of triremes tossed to and fro in the winds sent by Artemis' bow. And he had thought of battle tested friendships.

It is what happens after this battle that occupies the recesses and corners of Will's mind, corners Will does not want to peer into too closely. The implications are far too distant for Will to contemplate. But the notion of a life with Hannibal clings like damp dust to those far flung corners of his mind, unshakable no matter how many times he sweeps, the grunts and poetry of all they have shared will not be so easily scattered or ignored.

Will thinks these deliberations are long overdue as he shoves his wallet back into his pocket. Daniel's therapy has widened his doors of perception into himself and into Hannibal, though the rabbit hole deepens, the lens through which Will looks is much clearer. Daniel remains his anchor, but Will has to admit the sea is becoming choppy. Artemis' arrow already rides the wind…

The ride from Florence to Fiesole is not long and before he had drifted more deeply, the cab had pulled up to the drive and Will had found himself standing in front of the pretty golden hued house with the huge crimson glazed pots of white and yellow daisies situated on either side of the front door and spilling over the sides to trail along the red bricked porch. Thankfully, no shimmers of rosebud wallpaper or glimpses of his desolate inferno steal across the yard as he looks around.

He watches the cab pull away, observes Alia's car in the drive and walks through the grass; the touch of the tender blades tickling his toes draws a smile, a genuine one. Daniel has left the porch light on and Will sees Cara and Bella through the screen, pacing from side to side as he trudges through the damp yard. A chuckle escapes from his throat, the soft rumbling rings almost foreign in his ears, and the dogs bark as he draws closer. Walking up to the front porch feels more surreal than anything else he experienced today.

How was your day, Will? Oh, killed a guy, got arrested, and did I mention the intelligent psychopath I have been obsessing about showed up to help me? But, I'll just come inside and cuddle up with dogs…

He expects the door to be locked, and it should be, but it isn't. The hinges groan as he pushes the door open and Alia mutes the tv and rises from the couch.

"Will!" Alia is a blur of pink and green as she rushes across the carpet, her face creased with concern.

Daniel wanders out of the kitchen as Will shuffles the dogs along the foyer. He stops unsure of what exactly he should do next. He exchanges looks with Will and feels the familiar shift in his being as the whirlwind of emotion that is Will settles into his consciousness.

Will knew Alia and Daniel would be here, should have figured they would be hovering by the door, but he is still unused to sharing his space or his thoughts and as he sucks thoughtfully on his lower lip he realizes he didn't even think to phone that he was on his way. Daniel is a welcome presence, Alia…not so much. Not right now.

"*Che cavolo*! It's after midnight!" Alia looks Will over, takes in the change of clothes and walks over to him. She immediately places her hands on either side of the now wilted collar of his new button down shirt to rest on his shoulders. "You took a cab?"

Will prickles with the imposed intimacy but takes her slender fingers into his own, brushes his lips over them and is quickly away, to stand in the middle of the antique Italian rug, "I was fine with the solitude. Did Pazzi call you?"

Alia notes the detachment, coolly observes Will's stance in profile as he assesses her, because that is exactly what he is doing she is certain. "Not since I left the Uffizi. He hasn't called tonight if that's what you mean."

"No call about a security detail to relieve you?"

"No. Why?" She lifts her chin, defensive suddenly.

"He said he'd work on it, but I didn't expect anything tonight. You've been here for hours already, so you should go…get some sleep."

"I thought they weren't going to let you go. What happened you were held so long? It was self-defense, right?"

Will glances to Daniel standing at the edge of the kitchen who hangs his head in silent commiseration. Will can't talk to Alia about his arrest. She knows this, but she doesn't want to accept it. Daniel knows by the look on Will's face that there are complications. Of course there are. Hannibal is involved.

"I would still be there if Jack hadn't pulled some strings…again." Will says, trying to appear friendlier than he feels. "Look, Alia…you are going to hear some things, and because there are pending charges, I can't talk about any of this with you."

"You're going to let me hear it from Pazzi?"

"That's the way it has to be. You know that. Alia, I'm sorry…"

Alia stoops over the couch and reaches around inside her pocketbook. Out come the cigarettes and she lights one, pulling hard for the nicotine spike she needs. She takes her time as she contemplates the men in in the room with her. Men she eagerly helped into the Uffizi today and who happily played along with their roles of significant other. Observing professional obligations seems irrelevant when both of them are the ones deciding when it is convenient to bend the rules and when it isn't.

Anger mingles with frustration and she exhales the smoke at the ceiling before looking back at Will, who stubbornly remains in profile.

"*Il Capo* was there? At your headquarters?"

Alia walks closer, her arms slip around his neck and Will allows the embrace understanding that she needs the physical affirmation to accompany the relief she wants to feel. He understands the wanting, and though he feels shredded inside, he does not want to send her on her way angry. She won't be satisfied, but she should not leave Daniel's house feeling resentment toward either of them. He curls his hands around her wrists and brushes his lips against hers, a taste of iced tea and cigarettes briefly there and gone before rolling his shoulders back to ease from arms and hands reluctant to let go of him.

“Oh yeah. He was there. But he had a night at the opera to attend, so I’m sure he isn’t in any hurry to arrange protection tonight.”

“What time was the opera, Will?” Daniel asks as he glances at the clock on the mantle. It’s almost one now. Daniel wonders exactly when Will left headquarters.

“He didn’t say, probably started around eight…”

Will also glances at the clock, blinks a few times as the position of the hands register and he looks at Daniel. He lost time. The day makes no sense. Time has been passing in a bubble for him. He could not have been walking around the Uffizi at three, killing Paolini with Hannibal after that, then arrested and processed, to join Jack and Pazzi at Piazza Repubblica. And after all that, Pazzi still makes his opera…operetta. Even if the performance started at nine, that is a pretty packed afternoon. He cannot remember what time he left Jack and Pazzi in Jack’s office.

If Will left Pazzi with Jack before Pazzi left for the date with his wife, what has Will been doing for the past several hours?

Alia looks from one to the other. Both Daniel and Will seem suddenly apprehensive and they seem concerned about time, although what specifically seems to be the problem, Alia is not certain.

“Will...” Daniel starts, *It doesn’t take three hours to get from downtown to here…* he thinks with mounting alarm.

“I know…”

Will scratches at his neck around the collar, he wants out of these clothes. Alia’s hands remain at his sleeve and the soft brown eyes look up into his seeking assurances and offering comfort. He knows what she wants and he just can’t bring himself to offer any more than he already has. All he can think about is that he cannot account for the time. He is not even sure if how he remembers the day is actually what happened. Movement draws his eyes to shadowy corners of the living room and Will watches the creature with the red rimmed eyes unfold its black wings as talons scrape along the hardwood. Will’s eyes shift to Daniel who has moved from kitchen to living room.

“Probably haven’t eaten or drank anything since breakfast, huh?”

Daniel speaks while crossing the room swiftly. He brings a plastic bottle of water with him, chilled and wet from the fridge. He thrusts it into Will’s hands, “Drink this down.”

Will raises his brows, but grins gratefully and nods as he slips from Alia’s grasp, and makes his way across the rug and hardwood to stand by the piano taking great gulps of water. He is thirsty. No wonder he has a headache. He faces Alia and Daniel, drinking his water. He waits for the quieting mist he knows will eventually find him if he stands still and disengaged long enough.

He had been telling time just fine at the Uffizi. His time issues have not surfaced recently and Will is wondering which of the various emotional events prompted the episode today. Perhaps all. Will knows when he is hallucinating, knows when his dreams accompany him to crime scenes and into taxi cabs. Doesn’t he? This losing time comes and goes without warning and without any clear antecedents.

Daniel catches Alia's eyes, each of them imploring the other, holding their ground; Daniel at the other end of the piano and Alia still standing in the middle of the living room where Will had left her.

Alia senses a shift in the climate of the room. Warmth seems to kindle between the two men leaving a distinct chill hanging around her. She wants to know what happened today from Will before she leaves. She wants to hear from him why he attacked the Paolini so viciously. Hear from him what he believes Lecter was doing there. She will hear plenty from Pazzi tomorrow.

The intimacy Will and Daniel share is apparent in the way they seem to silently communicate right in front of her. Though she has no claim on Will, no declarations of commitment between them, her chest begins to ache regardless, as though she swallowed down a gulp of hurt and shooter of jealousy to top it off. Thoughts of the two of them in the bed upstairs refuse to recede further fueling her feelings of discord, but strangely of desire as well.

Her jaw tightens and she takes another long drag off the cigarette as she considers her options. This emotional tug of war between her job and her feelings is tearing her up. She reminds herself that Will brutally killed a man today, on her watch so to speak. He seems a little messed up right now and it is obvious Daniel is concerned. She would like to help if they would let her. But, whatever she learns she will be obligated to tell *il capo*. But, if the two of them are not hiding anything what does it matter if she stays?

Daniel senses Alia's inner turmoil like a second storm, as she fills the living room with smoke. He feels her frustration and can sympathize with her. She has to know there is nothing more she can do this evening, yet she remains rooted to the rug. Alia is a creature of instinct and emotion, a combination that likely serves her well as a detective but is highly combustible in matters of the heart.

Daniel decides to escort Alia out if he has to. He crosses the room and takes Alia by the arm, gently, and ignores the indignant arch of her brows and the mouth opened in protest. Will is managing a façade of reserved affection for her but Daniel recognizes he is coiled inside like a spring; he can see it in the tiny flinching of muscles likely sore from the fight and from hours of forced stillness at the Polizia precinct and then FBI headquarters. His entire being is flooded with Will's presence like spiders dancing across his skin.

He understands Will doesn't want to offend but Alia simply does not understand or appreciate Will's unique perspective or how his empathy affects him. She does not need to know how events today have affected him. Anyone's nerves would be shot after a day like Will has had, but Will is not anyone. His encounter with Hannibal coupled with the attack has overloaded his mind to the degree that he lost time today. An upsetting development with dangerous implications. If the emotional tension continues to rise, Will's mind may react in ways Daniel cannot predict. Not that Will is especially predictable to start with.

Will is not the only person with a warped sense of time, either. Daniel's world has been radically changed in the last seventy-two hours and things are just getting started. Will's imagination has been working overtime with no time to recover. After dreaming and hallucinating about Hannibal for months, Will finally met up with…his nemesis. That must practically short circuit anything else going on his brain.

He glances at Will standing motionless between piano and French doors. He faces the yard, but Daniel knows his backyard is not the vista Will gazes upon. There is a lot going on in his brain right this second and as his therapist, Daniel can help him sort through the feelings and images that assault him this evening. Talking to Will will at least help Daniel sort through his feelings. As he stands grasping Alia's forearm, his head still floating with fuzz Daniel is reminded how he has had to resort to medicating just to keep up.

Will is fully capable of handling Alia himself, but Daniel thinks it might be better if he comes off as the bad guy so Will can preserve whatever bond he seems to have created with her. He has no doubt Will's affection for her is genuine, as genuine as his own. But she has a lot of questions; questions Daniel is certain Will cannot answer, or will not answer to her satisfaction. As difficult as it is for her, as difficult as Will's large expressive blue eyes have made it for her, she has to be a cop right now. And she has to leave without the reassurance she wants. Daniel thinks she will have to get in line for that.

"You told Pazzi where we were today?" Will says moving closer to the piano; turning slightly to run long tapered fingers along its polished surface, as Alia nods, looking past Daniel. "That's good. You told him the truth?" Will looks up, disheveled curls falling over one eye.

She shakes her forearm as though dismissing an insect, but Daniel's hand remains firmly attached to it. "Yes. Not much to tell really. Strictly speaking we did take a tour of the museum."

"He asked if you were with me the entire time, didn't he? He knew Daniel was there. I told Jack he was."

"I admitted to not being with you the entire time we were there. I didn't tell him what you two did, switching places, but he probably assumed as much. You left the museum alone. I couldn't lie."

"I wouldn't want you to. Ever. It is vital you always tell Pazzi the truth. For your own protection."

"And if that includes investigating you?"

"It already does." He pauses to stare directly at her to make his point. "Be a detective, Alia and do your job."

Will turns toward the French doors raising the plastic bottle to his lips, he drinks as he peers out into the back yard, feels the cool liquid refresh him from the inside out, almost one organ at a time as the coolness seems to radiate from his gut. He sees the quiet undisturbed yard, but he doesn't trust it is as vacant as it appears.

"Alia," Daniel says, a little sharp but his tone registers and she tears her eyes from Will who has moved to stand directly in front of the French doors, face to the glass. "It's late…"

Daniel takes advantage of Will's distraction with the yard to grasp Alia's arm a tad more tightly, she allows it but looks up into his face and her pretty mouth is set in a stubborn pout. He leans down so he can whisper in her ear. She stiffens in his arms and Daniel finds it a remarkable switch from the lingering hugs and caresses in the Uffizi mere hours ago.

"This needy shit is going to stop right now. You want to help? Find evidence that exonerates him. But first, go home and get some sleep. We all could use some."

"Planning on tucking him in?" The words are out before she can stop herself.

"If he wants tucking in." Daniel returns evenly.

“Are you talking as his psychiatrist or something else?” Alia whispers back.

Daniel draws her closer, twirls a lock of hair in his fingers, “This isn’t a contest, Alia. It never was.”

“*Va a cagare…*” Alia whispers back then pulls away but Daniel tugs her back against his chest. Will can’t hear him though he can likely guess what their conversation is about as he watches their reflections in the window panes. His lips find her ear again, and her fidgeting gradually grinds down as Daniel speaks.

“*Siamo tutti fottuti*. There’s no happy ending to this, Alia. We get our moments, that’s all. This one’s mine.”

Alia looks over Daniel’s shoulder at Will. He still stands at the French doors facing out; she can see his face in the tiny panes of the window and the set mouth and vacant eyes signal that Will is not in the room with them. He is no doubt reliving everything he experienced today and working the images through his mind in his own particular way. She sighs as she slumps against Daniel, thinking she should not push it. Daniel is Will’s therapist. He will always have that edge.

She squeezes Daniel’s shoulders, and looks up. The green eyes are tired, but kind; there is in fact no reproach at all. He cares about Will, too and knows Will in ways she does not. What Daniel holds in his head about Will is classified under doctor patient confidentiality and Pazzi will try and use her association with them to his advantage. Will wants her to cooperate with Pazzi. But does he want her cooperation to assist in catching Lecter or does Will plan on killing Lecter himself? Or something far darker than that?

“Good night, Will” Alia calls from the front door.

“Good night, Alia.” Will says from the French doors turning slightly to see her out.

He bushes the hair off his forehead and breathes a sigh of relief audible from where he stands as Daniel swings the door behind her, pausing to hold it open a crack a moment longer as he watches her climb into her car, phone in hand, already dialing.

“She’s on the phone?” Will asks.

“Yeah…calling Pazzi no doubt. If she can’t get answers from you, she’ll get them from him.”

“She’s not calling Pazzi this late, probably Ruggerio. But, whatever helps her sleep. Thanks for the intervention. I am…spent.”

Daniel crosses the living room to the kitchen and returns to join Will at the French doors with another bottle of water. “You are dehydrated. Who picked out the funeral outfit and the Jesus sandals?”

“That would be Jack. Jack in a hurry.”

“Very plain. Very you. Go, take a shower.” Daniel says, “Hungry?”

“I’ll think about it while I melt…” Will says climbing the stairs. “She, um…didn’t wander around the house?”

Daniel glances at the basement door, “No…we took the dogs out for a while, got something to eat on the way back from the park. Stayed outside on the patio. Then she wanted to turn on the tv, watch the news.”

“She looked around even if you didn’t notice. She’s been here before and she’d have picked up on anything out of place.”

“She didn’t say anything.”

“She wouldn’t. But, you kept her out of the house and distracted?”

“I guess we’ll find out how distracted. How’s your head?”

“Painfully still attached.” Will says glancing over at the corner where the creature sits, its eyes luminous as they stare back at him.

Will turns and resumes climbing the stairs and Daniel watches him ascend, the weight of Will’s footsteps echoing inside. Keeping Alia distracted and occupied had not been difficult. Daniel is becoming very adept at playing the surrogate. He plays Hannibal for Will. He plays Will for Alia and he suspects, for Du Maurier. He will play Will again at FBI headquarters tomorrow. As he climbs the stairs holding a bottle of twelve year old bourbon and two tumblers, he decides to resume his role of therapist this evening. It is at least an honest role.

Will steps out of the shower, towels off and stands in front of the mirror. He takes the towel to the glass, wipes off the condensation and stands back. His gaze is drawn to the scar across his stomach. He thinks of it now as so much more than a brand of betrayal. It is more than a pale line of puckered sutures across his flesh. The thick thread is a demarcation of before and after and a line dividing the upper half from lower, separating heart from legs – emotion from action.

It would have been easy for Hannibal to plunge the linoleum blade into his chest instead. Or slice into his jugular as he had cradled Will’s head in his hands. Will had been blindsided and his gift had failed him. His mind had been unable to absorb what was happening, unable to grapple with implications, associations…and loyalties.

Hannibal had taken the blade across his midriff, severing the muscle and tissue protecting vital organs rather than slice through the softer lower abdomen and risk nicking bowels. The scar is ugly; marring the perfection Hannibal had lovingly sketched over and over. Hannibal had marked him to be sure. It also seems to Will that Hannibal had been punishing himself, ruining what he loved so that should Will ever find his way back, Hannibal’s eyes would never again alight upon his naked flesh without seeing the wound he had carved there, and his fingers would never touch him without being reminded of the betrayal. Hannibal had left the scar for himself, too.

The scar also functions as Hannibal’s line in the sand, an invitation to cross the boundary of life and death. To wade into his stream and sink into its depths or accept the hand of the creator and be reborn into another life.

Put your head back. Close your eyes. Wade into the quiet of the stream.

Will’s own words had been spoken tauntingly from blood stained lips back at him, words that echoed with all the other words spoken between them in the same kitchen, some words falling like feather soft caresses and others slamming sharply like the click of a gun clip. Will had held his SIG-Sauer on Hannibal in that very kitchen, purposely choosing the SIG intending to complete the circle begun by shooting Hobbs in another kitchen with the same weapon. But, Hannibal had asked him that cold afternoon in front of his immaculate metal fridge; *Don't you want to know how this ends*?

And Will's curiosity had trumped his righteousness…easily. He had lowered his weapon and left Hannibal standing in front of his open fridge, his lips drawn in a thin smug line, infuriatingly unflustered. Will had shown up for his usual appointment that evening, right on time. Without his SIG. Or his Glock 17. Or the Berretta *Cheetah*.

Hello, Will.

May I come in?

Do you intend to point a gun at me?

Not tonight.

And so the epic…romance had resumed. How could either of them have known their circle of violence and intimacy would bring them around to Hannibal's kitchen once again? Will thinks with a wry smile that families do spend more time in the kitchen than any other room in the house.

Will had not waded into his stream but had instead awakened on the shores of Hades and he had accepted Charon's ride and he now twists in his inferno, the awful poem incomplete…an unfinished symphony, the ink still wet.

Hannibal had known how the mirrors in Will's mind would reflect the pain of everyone in the house that night, how deeply he would absorb the agony into himself, and he had known Will would blame himself. One cannot blame the predator for following his instincts. Hannibal's punishment had sent Will on a journey consistent with the goals of his therapy.

With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar, and I can whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches, follows its own nature and is beyond me...

Rebirths can only ever be symbolic.

You've been reborn.

Wasn't that the goal of my therapy?

The blade Hannibal had thrust into his flesh tearing him open would either release him from the life he had known or release the thing growing inside. Foolish to think a mere blade could cut it out of him. Hannibal has been expecting Will, been waiting for Will. Curious if the creature inside is adversary or friend. Hannibal has destroyed him and recreated him in his own image. Will is clay in his hands. Beloved and cherished clay, but clay nonetheless. Will doubts the creator would grant another rebirth. There is only so much hubris a god can endure.

He thinks the dying ravenstag upon the floor a reflection of the fading bag of blood of breath Will had been that night, and it too had been reborn, changed in Will's imagination to reflect the emotional and physical changes his subsequent transformation has wrought upon his soul. The blade was never intended to separate Will from Hannibal, or Hannibal from him. The blade is part of the language between them; speaking to the circle of violence and intimacy they understand and share. Will remembers one of his dreams of lying in scented satin with Hannibal in Baltimore…

Then, it was not the call that caused me to wound you, Will. We are alone without each other. Why would I cut you from me?

Hannibal had thrust the blade to wound, a punishment to Will, but Will realizes Hannibal had been punishing himself. Will had cut him deeply enough to cause Hannibal to injure, to ruin the creature who had ripped his senses from him. Will can imagine Hannibal's blood boiling, seething inside after sniffing Lounds on his clothes in his office. Can imagine the undercurrent of revenge rippling through his limbs as they had dined and later, had…

And when Will had shown up to his house finally, had turned from the sight of Abigail alive and trembling to face him, Hannibal had been prepared to gut him, to cut out the part of himself Will had claimed, recognizing and hating the weakness for what it was, but he had been unable to do it.

We both know the unreality of taking a life. The people who die when we have no other choice, we know in those moments they are not flesh, but light, and air, and color.

Isn't that what it is to be alive?

Indeed. He had been unable to destroy the thing he loved; choosing instead to leave the bag of breath, blood, and bones on the floor, for the creator had deemed the light, air and color of this bag of flesh too precious to part with. Hannibal let the blade speak for him, carving a more eloquent message than words ever could between them.

Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment when the teacup shatters. I forgive you, Will. Will you forgive me?

Like a wrathful God in his garden discovering his creation had committed the crime of not fulfilling expectations, rather than execution, grisly punishment had quickly followed, and so had forgiveness. The punishment had assuaged the anger, the forgiveness proffered as much for the creation as the creator, but forgiveness from the creation is necessary to complete the circle. The creator wishes to restore the shattered cup in anticipation of walking in the garden again. He can accept that the cup is damaged, broken; it will not be the same, and a piece is missing. A piece removed with the same surgical precision that spared him, and the piece was discarded as a dream left to die on the floor. Can his creation also accept the broken cup and drink from it? Can he accept and embrace his rebirth?

Hannibal does not know if Will seeks to forgive or to avenge.

At first, Will remembers he could not take a breath without experiencing the tug of muscle and tissue still healing. Over time, he could breathe and move almost without noticing, without flinching at the sensitivity. Now, unless he runs his fingers over the raised remnants of that night, he doesn't physically feel the scar except in his imagination. The creature inside continues to slither and coil around the organs spared by the creator's surgical precision. His body has healed, has accepted the injury and taken the flesh back into itself. His mind is trying to heal, to accept as well.

So much of his life had poured out of the gaping wound onto Hannibal's floor, as though all the memories of his existence before ever meeting Hannibal had spilled out in a torrent to mingle with the blood and memories of everyone else and he feels as though he had drowned in a pool of pulsing plasma only to awaken empty and shattered as the teacup. He has to struggle now to remember life before Hannibal. Gradually, the shattered shards have been coming together, coming together in another circle of violence and intimacy that will tempt the gods again, only this time… Achilles intends his Patroclus drink from the cup with him.

Will wraps the towel around his waist, opens the bathroom door to allow the steam to dissipate. The cup draws itself together in Will's' mind, and with every kill the seams between the shards become less pronounced, causing an induced craquelure to spread along the surface of the image in his mind, the essence of their lives caught between cracks seeming etched by the flames of fiery infernos.

Hannibal has been providing the blood and breath to fuel his radiance. While caught in the blinding light of his own radiance, the killer in Will revels in his instincts without the anticipation of regret. Killing the Paolini had caused no inner conflict. His sense of good and evil had been appeased. He had not hesitated, had not been given to dubious decisions. The positive wrapped in a negative. Will has learned he can kill in the absence of regret.

Which is why Hannibal has engaged the Trojans. To show Will the negative, to recapture that awesome sense of power he had felt with Tier. Being forced to kill in defense is different than hunting. Hannibal hunts in his dreams with Will. Dreams prepare us for waking life. Will has dreamed of hunting, too. He will have to manage his expectations in order to appreciate the positive, to appreciate…hunting. It will be much more difficult to kill the Greeks. Hannibal knows Will's heart. He knows Will cannot separate himself completely from his impressions and associations. His empathy does not allow him to kill with Hannibal's impunity, and Hannibal recognizes that Will suffers when he kills. Hannibal finds this flaw in his creation tragically beautiful and he loves him all the more for it.

Hannibal would not take from Will the thing that makes him unique. But he does want Will to accept his gift to him, and manage it. So…first the Trojans, then the Greeks. And then, they will have their honest conversation.

"Your mind must be miles away."

Startled, Will looks up. Daniel stands by the dresser holding out a tumbler of amber colored liquor and two round white pills in the other. Will quickly takes inventory of the bedroom. At least he is alone in the room with Daniel. For now.

"It often is." Will responds, taking the tumbler and lifting a brow at the outstretched palm. "What's that?"

"Ibuprofen. I suspect you've got some sore muscles. Any aches or pains?"

"Yeah, actually. I think I pulled a muscle in my neck."

"Probably twisted it. Let me have a look at what the hot water didn't fix." Daniel ignores the roll of pale blue eyes, and the stubborn twist of lips. "Take the meds with your bourbon and sit down. God, you're difficult."

"Only one of my many alluring attributes."

Will settles on the mattress, tosses down the pills with a large gulp from the tumbler, and throws his head back as the heat rides his throat. He offers a lop sided grin as the taste of caramel settles on his tongue, sweet like candy but wild and woody as it evaporates. He drains the glass and holds out the tumbler.

Daniel grins and refills it. “Good stuff, huh?”

“I think we won’t be up early for the FBI tomorrow.”

“Crawford doesn’t really expect you in there at the crack of dawn, does he? I’m not planning on going in much before noon.”

Will’s grin grows larger still. Daniel will waltz in when he feels like it and Jack will let him get away with it because Daniel doesn’t respond to Jack’s gruffness except to smile charmingly, completely disarming Jack with kindness. He feels the mattress sink as Daniel climbs in to sit behind him, thumbs and fingers already at his neck pressing along the vertebrae. He hears the muffled cracks from the back of his neck and feels the tendons move beneath the massage.

“Ouch! Ah….right there.” Will hisses, setting the tumbler on the nightstand.

“You’ll have to lie down for this. The floor would be too hard and there’s the dog hair, but this mattress is solid enough.”

“Yes…it is.” Will says, retrieving the tumbler and taking another gulp before he stretches out along the bed. “I can’t remember the last time I had a massage.”

“I’ll bet that’s not true, but thank you for lying about it.” Daniel says, straddling Will’s lower back and easing his legs on either side. “Head flat, to the side…get the pillows out of here.”

“You make such a production out of it.”

Daniel settles then grinds against the swell of his butt for good measure. The playfulness teases the tension from stiff tired limbs and Will sinks further into the mattress, even his jaw loosens. He hadn’t realized he had been so wound up. No wonder his neck is sore.

“Oh, we’re just getting started. Ugh. You are really tight. How can you walk around coiled up like this?”

“With difficulty.”

“I guess so. Your emotional state doesn’t help, probably prompted the lost time. No idea what you did?”

“No…and I know that upsets you. It upsets me. I’m hoping I just zoned out while waiting for a cab.”

“What’s the last thing you do remember?”

“Sitting on the bench outside of headquarters, watching the carousel…”

“No wonder you zoned out. No taxis drive up on the piazza. You must have eventually wandered under the arch and hailed a cab there.”

“I thought I called for one. Maybe I got distracted and didn’t.”

“I’m afraid to turn on the news…” Daniel pauses, presses down and hears the crack accompanied by another groan from Will. “Pretty remarkable you got away without a scratch. Guess that makes you one of those guys I wouldn’t want to meet in a dark alley.”

“I’m one of those guys you shouldn’t meet under any circumstances.”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I…” Daniel grinds his thumb into Will’s neck, and Will flinches with the pop of cartilage that shifts under the skin. “…seem to be attracted to psychopaths.”

“It’s a mistake to feel sorry for them, you know.”

“You think I feel sorry for you?”

“I think…your empathy leaves you with little choice.”

“I think you shouldn’t tell me how I feel. Especially about you. Nobody likes to be reduced to a set of influences…even psychiatrists.”

Will chuckles into the mattress. Daniel’s gentle humor descends like his mist and Will feels his body slowly yield to the minute ministrations and adjustments Daniel makes along his spine.

The little gasps that explode from Will’s lips at the pops and clicks are almost reward enough. Almost.

“Hannibal left you holding the bag again today, didn’t he? Not that you had time to plan it out…did you?”

“Not much.” Will groans, “As I was walking back from the Uffizi he called. Offered to help. Gave me instructions, which I followed. We ambushed them from a cluster of alleyways. Problem… solved. Now I’ve brand new ones. Or same old ones…”

“I take it Jack doesn’t know about the phone calls.”

Daniel’s hands begin applying pressure down his spine. Nearly every one of Will’s vertebrae crack as he grinds his palm against Will’s back and with every crack Will’s tired muscles give and the pain he had been feeling begins to abate. Will marvels that he has been feeling that pain for a while and accepting it as normal. He frowns into the mattress. Another disturbing metaphor for his life, such as it is.

“No. I locked the phone, got it back intact, as far as I know. Ah…”

Will sighs as a knot between his shoulder blade pops, “If they took it I would know that they know I’ve been in contact with him. I’m not much use as bait if they do that. They couldn’t have released me unless they keep that smoking gun out, and they won’t do that because the phone call proves it was not self-defense but premeditated, and it proves conspiracy. If they let me go and brought it up later, it might get tossed. Ignoring evidence like that would kill somebody’s career.”

“They could still lie about it. Or just say fuck it, we’d rather catch Lecter and worry about the fallout later.”

“And if it was just the State Polizia I would agree. But there are other agencies involved.”

“So Pazzi couldn’t get anything off it, and Jack didn’t press the issue. Jack suspects?”

“Jack…is keeping an open mind.”

“What do we think Pazzi is doing?”

“Pazzi likes to believe there is some rivalry with Jack, the territorial kind. Jack is using that. Local PD and FBI often lock horns. Compound that with the local PD being Italian and the FBI being American. Interpol liaisons have been largely absent, preferring to let the FBI and Polizia do the leg work. They’ll step in if there’s a major operation in play. So Pazzi is seeking to one up Jack, and looking to either make the headlines with an arrest or make money from Mason.”

“You think he’ll grab you and go for the reward. And Jack?”

“Jack will let him. Jack will let him because Jack already knows I suspect as much, and Jack will be watching and waiting for that to happen.”

“To step in?”

“Depends on the size of the shit storm Pazzi makes of it. Jack will look the other way, like he did with me.”

“And he is looking the other way with you again.”

“So much of this feels like a dream, like slipping down the same rabbit hole.” Will reaches for his tumbler.

“Maybe because you keep throwing out the same lure. So Jack sits back and keeps his own council, lets you and Pazzi draw Hannibal out. How does that make you feel?”

“Confident. It’s the smart move. Given they keep throwing out the same lure.” Will raises his glass in a mock toast. “It’s expected. And we all know it’s expected. Jack is waiting for the twist.”

Daniel watches him drink and takes a sip from his own glass swishing it around his mouth the flavor so good he thinks maybe someone should wrap it up like a Jolly Rancher.

“Hannibal set the stage with the tableaux. He didn’t have to make a spectacle, he wanted one.” Daniel says.

“Of course. You don’t think he’s been vegetarian this whole time, do you? That’s why I started investigating missing persons, but I couldn’t see a pattern. He’s been discreet…always was choosy about the groceries…”

“How do you think he got in at the Uffizi? I don’t imagine vacancies come along that often.”

“Victor Boucher…”

Will stifles a laugh and Daniel smiles at the sound, his expression quizzical as he looks into Will’s face.

“What?” Daniel says.

“The name. He just can’t resist the awful pun. Do you have any idea how awful they could get after half a bottle of scotch?”

Daniel’s mouth falls open and Will settles more deeply into the mattress head pressed against the headboard, bites his tongue and wonders how that delicious little confession slipped out. He is feeling far too comfortable with Daniel. The bourbon is going down so easily. He clears his throat and abandons that train of thought although he’s sure Daniel won’t.

“Boucher only recently joined the uh…faculty or whatever they call it there. I imagine he had to give interviews, offer some work…published under that name. I should check…” Will pushes off the mattress and is pushed back down. He shakes the tousled mane a tad testily, but relaxes with the steady kneading that feels ever so good. “He’s been published under that name, Daniel, or somebody has.”

“Not necessarily. In lieu of being published, letters of recommendation from other museums, from archaeologists and historians might do. But, they would be followed up.”

“Can’t question the dead. I wonder how many of his recommendations came from the deceased. No, I think he was published. That would be consistent with how he approaches everything. He had this identity planned in advance. Just in case he ever had to leave Baltimore. He is likely preparing another as he walks the Vasari Corridor.”

“That makes sense. He doesn’t leave much to chance does he?”

“He can, when it amuses him. But you’re right; he is capable of managing multiple scenarios at once. His departure from Baltimore was also planned, set into action when I returned to therapy with him, maybe even before that. But he had help.”

Will thinks Du Maurier took his seat on the plane, or Abigail’s. A last minute change of plans that Du Maurier tolerated, perhaps made possible, but for her own reasons has never forgiven. Will wonders if Hannibal ever disclosed anything to Du Maurier about his sister. Anything at all about his life before leaving Europe behind him. Her comments to Daniel suggest not, but what she told Daniel was intended as manipulation. Du Maurier may be the only other person besides Will to know Hannibal in any intimate way.

“Du Maurier.” Daniel says.

“Yeah. And Jack knows about it, too. He keeps asking me what I think about her, but he didn’t let her go without cutting some sort of deal.” Will reaches for his tumbler, takes another swig, “You know…Jack is probably wondering how many psychopaths he has running around Florence right now.”

“No wonder he’s not telling Pazzi about her. Hannibal wants Jack to think Du Maurier helped with the tableaux.”

Daniel feels the flesh loosening beneath his fingers. He takes note of the definition in the musculature and figures Will must have added more weight to his workouts, and with very pleasing results. He feels buzzed and can’t decide which is more distracting; the effects of the bourbon or Will’s form stretched out beneath him. He tries to focus on what Will is saying, and wonders how Will is even lucid given the events today and the amount of bourbon he has tossed down in the last ten minutes.

“He wants to confuse Jack. It’s working. I don’t think Du Maurier is aware of the details of the tableaux. She has an agenda with Hannibal and Hannibal is using me to advance his agenda with her. Jack is using her until he figures out my agenda or she leads him to Hannibal first.”

“And that’s why you want to continue with the farce out at the estate. To find out what her agenda is.”

“That…won’t be easy. Not knowing what she knows. We are aware of her, and Jack doesn’t know what we know. In order for Jack to figure her out, he won’t tell her about our connection or the blonde hair we found. We can at least keep her guessing about us. I do not want to alert Du Maurier that Hannibal and I are in contact. Let her assume Jack has not said anything about her to me, either.”

Daniel shakes his head like he has water in his ears. He can’t imagine how Will keeps all this straight in his head, all the time. He reminds himself that Will’s mind is like a stovetop keeping multiple burners going at the same time, each of them cooking something different. Whether soaked in alcohol or not.

“Everybody’s fishing right now.” Daniel offers the only salient point he can muster.

“Pretty much.” Will says.

Will traces his fingers along the varnished wood of the headboard, aware of the creature curling in his gut and he imagines it twisting among his entrails as thoughts of Du Maurier and the sleek viper of his dreams merge, becoming points of light in his consciousness like a constellation in the sky. Du Maurier will be the prime topic of conversation when he finally locates Hannibal in Impruneta.

“I think Hannibal is playing her, setting her up with the blonde hair. Jack has to consider her a player. She’s not telling him what she knows. And neither are we. Jack has no idea Hannibal has been your patient. Has no idea about the connection to the Uffizi...yet. He is waiting for something to pop to tell him what direction to take. And if nothing pops, he will green light Pazzi’s plan and look the other way. And while Hannibal is happy to take the credit for both tableaux, I’ll bet Du Maurier is not.

“Hannibal has led her to believe he did both and Jack won’t tell her any different. But, she has nothing to do with the Paolini.”

“Which matters not at all to Hannibal. I’m already suspect, unavoidable. Hannibal is setting her up.”

“Why? To muddy the water?”

“Absolutely and because she is setting him up. Or believes she is. Jack remains her get out of jail free card, if she plays that right. So far, she has.”

“How does she see you in all this?”

“That is a good question and the answer helps explain how I think she sees you, too. To simplify… she sees herself as a swan.”

Daniel blinks as he considers the metaphor within the context of Hannibal’s mythical universe, which seems to become more populated all the time. The blonde hair *was* wrapped around the goose feathers. As he gazes at Will prone beneath him on the bed, tumbler hanging at his fingertips, arm draped over the side, he feels the certainty of Will’s words wrap around him like a cloud. Will is confident in his thinking.

Daniel's eyes wander to the curve of butt cheek peeking out from above the plush plum colored terry cloth and thinks if Du Maurier has a longstanding relationship with Hannibal, and that relationship is based on something other than their twisted mutual professional curiosity, which apparently extended to him, she might find Hannibal's possessiveness of a particular patient vexing, especially since he had already sent one of his patients to presumably kill her.

"Does Hannibal want you to kill her?"

Daniel thinks he has never asked a patient about killing before. With Will, homicidal inquiries are becoming a routine part of the therapy. Daniel doubts whether therapy is the precise term for what he is doing with Will.

Will's answer comes as an especially huge and exasperated sigh as he shifts along the mattress. Will does not want to say too much to Daniel about his piece on the board. For now, Daniel is a moving target as his role in the drama has yet to be determined.

"She is playing chess with Hannibal. And we are the pieces." Daniel says as though reading Will's mind.

"On a very large and constantly unbalanced board. I don't know what Hannibal's end game with her is, but whatever he is trying to persuade her to think is not it. Which she has already figured out. But Hannibal…"

Will sighs and stretches and Daniel does not miss the curve of soft red lips before he turns his head to smile begrudgingly into the rumpled white cotton.

"…Hannibal knows she will dismiss the obvious so he is actually convincing her he is doing something else entirely. And that…whatever it is…is not what he is really planning at all."

Daniel thinks a moment, brows furrowed in concentration as Will's insinuations tumble around his head, very much like an avalanche as he realizes that Hannibal moves many pieces simultaneously, surreptitiously, while emerging triumphant and virtually unscathed.

"He cheats." Daniel says.

"Impossible." The tangle of curls shakes from side to side until Will's nose peeks out in profile once again, "Does God cheat? Well, neither does Hannibal. It's his universe."

Daniel huffs and remembers he hasn't told Will what he learned about Du Maurier and her unfortunate patient.

"You know that patient she admitted to killing in self-defense?"

"What about him?"

"Seems that patient was a former patient of Hannibal's and he was the only son of a very wealthy family. His issues pointed to the bipolar with a hint of the psychotic. He'd been hospitalized. The family was so upset by their son's madness and by his attack on Du Maurier they showered her with all kinds of money. Digging further, she kept in contact with the family apparently, because a couple years later, the parents died within a year of each other…grieving suicides."

"She was a beneficiary of their estate."

“How’d you know?”

“How does one, with such impeccable taste as she, maintain her luxurious life style? I doubt she relies on Hannibal’s largesse. She retired after her attack. Hannibal was her only patient. Must have quite a nest egg to draw on.”

Du Maurier’s design unfolds in Will’s mind, told in the pages of obituaries over many years. She also hunts, not content with manufacturing insight; she would manufacture a legacy, by stealing the legacies from others. But this predator is bereft of ethics or aesthetics, her design is not elegant; merely clever. Hannibal is affronted by the pretend swan.

“Did he expect her to survive his…referral?” Daniel asks, thinking Hannibal's predilection for sending patients on killing sprees should have caught someone's attention before Will.

“I think he was curious. I also think he exploited the outcome to his advantage while never feeling anything more than…curiosity. He sent the patient to test her, to see if she possessed the mettle to join him at the table."

"She survived, but…”

“Not the way he had hoped. She has remained within his inner circle.” Will says.

It's like he had to show me a negative so that I could see the positive.

In meeting Will, knowing Will, Hannibal had likewise been shown negative and positive. Will suspects that perhaps Du Maurier had already begun to lose her luster, but Hannibal’s fascination with Will had cinched it.

“She is threatened by you. You upset the balance between them.”

“Maybe. I clearly enjoy a much more elevated status. It might not have always been the case. If you think about it, whatever their arrangement, it was going smoothly until I entered the picture.”

“She resents you. So why would she help you? Clue you in that she understood what Hannibal was doing with you back in Baltimore?”

“I’m not so sure it was helping now as much as meddling. They clearly want to be rid of each other but something has kept them from killing each other. And he knows about the meddling. She knows he knows. But he didn’t know about me being here…with you, until he smelled me on you in his office. He said he found me the same way he found Lounds, so until that appointment, he didn’t know.”

“Fuck…who knows what and when?”

“It’s possible even they don’t know. Part of their game.”

“So we can assume Hannibal and Du Maurier are baiting each other and using you to do it.”

“Daniel, they have been using you to bait each other, too. Depending on when one or both of them learned of our association, they have been using you for a while. There is a certain irony in placing Hannibal in the role of patient.”

“I’m sure the irony is more twisted than I can imagine. What are they doing, then?”

“They are the two vipers in my dream. One seeks to transform into a swan. The other already is a swan. I think he let her see him, glimpse him. She has never betrayed him, but neither has she lived up to…expectations.”

“You were supposed to be the prize. But you…failed him.”

“Yes. Not just failed, but betrayed. And he let me live. Then, he went back to her. That must really…hurt.” Will chuckles again, really loosening up, “I mean, how good can you feel about yourself when your competition is…me?”

Daniel agrees Will is a mess, but all things considered, what a beautiful mess he is. Daniel digs into Will’s shoulders, kneading the sore muscles and enjoying the sensation of silky skin. He thinks again of the blonde hair and the goose feathers. Each of them wants the goose, but for different reasons. He thinks perhaps Hannibal is warning Will that she is as dangerous as the Paolini. Swans can be pretty vicious creatures. Images of sparring vipers fill his head and he realizes Will had absorbed the seeds of those associations in his subconscious previously and those seeds had finally sprouted in his dreams.

“He’s playing a game with both of you at the same time?”

“Looks that way. She *is* tangled up in this, just like she was tangled up in the goose feather garni.”

“What is she to him? The ex-something I can’t even begin to guess?”

“I’m still trying to figure out what that is.” Will says thinking of Eve, but figuring he has said enough already. Will can imagine trying to explain Hannibal’s universe to Jack while keeping a straight face and a grin threatens to explode at the mere thought. The bourbon continues to relax him and between the effects of the alcohol and Daniel’s fingers, Will’s head is floating on foam.

“Hannibal has her figured out. How about Jack?”

“Hannibal knows Jack as well as I do. He knows how Jack’s mind works and how Jack wants to believe I am not completely corrupted.”

Will pauses, turns to look over his shoulder but Daniel does not comment. Daniel takes a sip of his drink, his eyes kindly indulgent as they peer back at him over the lip of his glass. “But, Hannibal is also systematically removing all my remaining supports. Gradually, but he’s already alienating me, just like last time.”

“And you are allowing him, just like last time.”

“I am allowing it, but it’s not like last time. Jack is not just on the fence about me, he’s practically climbed down the other side and run off. Hannibal is taking advantage of that.”

“He wants to make you choose.”

“So does Jack. Hannibal is making it more difficult for me to play both sides.”

“You said play, not choose, Will.”

“That’s how Hannibal sees the situation. He’s not sure whose side I am on.”

“Whose side are you on?”

Will groans into the mattress. “Mine…I think.”

“How much longer are you going to sit on the fence?”

Will looks again from over his shoulder but does not answer. Daniel decides to approach his question from a different angle.

“Tell me about what happened today…with the Paolini.”

Daniel’s hands find Will’s hips and he presses his thumbs close along either side of his spine, feeling the knots lodged there. If Daniel can get him to admit what is on his mind to him, maybe Will can finally accept it himself, and some of those knots might untwist. The need to cling to who he was is strong, but Hannibal’s pull on Will is also strong. It is the struggle that tears Will apart; not the choice. Will’s choices are not limited to simply either this or that. The sadness in Will flows deeply through him, a river at the bottom of a deep canyon. Daniel suspects that river flows through his inferno at the bottom of a ravine just as deep. Will peers over the precipice every time he visits there.

“How did you kill him, Will?”

“Spectacularly…dramatically. With a knife.”

“I mean *how* did you kill him? It’s the *how* that has everybody’s tongues wagging.”

“I gutted him. Oh…you meant how did gutting him make me *feel*?” The sarcasm begins to drip.

“I guess he had it coming…” Daniel mimics Will’s tone and thinks he’ll need more than sarcasm to avoid him, especially since Daniel is practically on top of that beautiful bulbous bum of his.

As if reading Daniel’s mind, Will turns over to sit up, toppling Daniel sideways. He sets the empty tumbler on the nightstand and waits for Daniel to sit up on the bed. He notices the wound from Luciano’s wound is healing well and thinks it will leave a slight scar not unlike his own though less severe.

“We seem to have a little more in common.” Will says nodding at Daniel’s stomach.

Daniel rubs his hand over the dark line of scabs that thread across his belly. The wound is lower than Will’s and not nearly as long, but almost in the same place. “Not…a comforting thought, Will.”

Daniel arranges himself, legs crisscrossed, unable to wipe the perturbed expression from his face before Will catches the flash of green and the fleeting frown. Will adjusts his towel to keep it from slipping off. He presses a finger to Daniel’s sternum and trails it along tanned skin to rest at the elastic band of faded plaid boxers, watching Daniel’s face as he does.

Daniel’s brows raise as Will’s finger drops lower and his eyes widen as much from the touch as the imagery Will’s finger evokes. His body stiffens with the emotions that accompany those images. He takes a gulp of his drink, then another and decides to just polish off the bourbon.

“Cut him open from there…to there,” Will’s finger remains on the hairline below Daniel’s navel. “The blade sliced through him like he was a stick of butter.”

Daniel sets his tumbler down on the opposite nightstand, wipes his mouth, his eyes never leaving Will’s face. “Hannibal was watching you this time.”

“With almost paternal pride.”

“And you felt good. It felt good to kill this bad person who was going to kill you. And you showed off. Took it up a couple notches.”

Daniel stares at the tangle of wet curls and the large placid blue eyes. Daniel witnessed what Will did to Luciano. And this time, Will used a knife…expertly by the sound of it. Jack might want to believe that Will indulged in the dramatic to impress Hannibal, but Daniel knows better. Jack is not privy to Will’s dreams.

Will tilts his head, eyes glittering and intense as he meets Daniel’s gaze. Daniel must already feel his answer and he’s not emotionally retreating from Will; his presence remains in the wisps of ocean mist that seem to stream across the mattress and pillows. Daniel is not really asking a question but stating fact as he sits absorbing reflections of Will with his own mirror.

“It felt just as much a dream as it felt real. This feels real.” Will tugs at the sheet. “All of this…feels real and it also feels like I am stumbling through the surreal.”

“I imagine killing requires a different mindset than what you experience normally. And what you experience normally is off the charts to begin with. What did you experience?”

Will presses his lips together as he considers his words for Daniel. “I used to imagine what each killer felt like. Imagined his thoughts, motives. And they were all different. People kill for different reasons and what they feel is highly individual and dependent on the circumstances. Now that I’ve killed more than once, I have some basis for um…comparison.”

Is it harder imagining the thrill somebody else feels killing, now that you've done it yourself?

“Psychopaths share a common tendency toward compulsion. I mean, someone who kills once in self-defense must be different from the person who…thinks about it, *for a living,* …in between kills.”

“Getting a little uncomfortable?” Will says, “Are you trying to understand my pathology?”

“I suppose I am. This is a very delicate and awkward conversation. I know you in the way you have allowed me to know you. I have felt when you are honest and when you are not. You are honest most of the time so I believe I am seeing Will. I know the Will you become when you kill. I’ve seen him, felt him, but what I’m asking is if what you experience is really your own experience or a composite of killers you’ve profiled?”

“Thinking of one in particular?”

“Actually, yes. He opened you up and let them all out. You’ve been thinking like him for a long time. Are you sure that what you feel when you kill is…you? Or still him?”

“You said seeing the good in Hannibal would help me see the good in myself. It has to work both ways, Daniel.”

“The lens you were looking through at the time was only allowing you to see the monster in him. If becoming meant that you had to become a monster…you would continue to deny the part of him that is part of you. Good and Evil do not exist separate and apart. Hannibal is not…completely evil.”

The devil is not as dark as he appears…

Associations assume form, and pearlescent wings flutter behind Will’s eyes. “Hannibal has been a mirror into myself.”

“Because you let him in, became him…for a little while. And he knows your mind. He knew what would happen if you did. Or, as you say…he hoped.”

“As one psychiatrist to another, you know what he did, don’t you? Associations. He knew how killing made me feel. He knew my…values and sense of decency were deeply shaken by the things I felt. He also knew I liked the feeling. Justice and righteousness are feelings, but they are also concepts. Concepts are malleable in Hannibal’s universe. Laws are…limitations. If I could learn to associate justice and righteousness with those really good feelings I get from killing, then…”

“You too would redefine your concepts. You’d be defying society and God. Just like he does. You see how he sees. Feel how he feels. You are the only person capable of doing that and appreciating what he is. So, truthfully Will, how did *you* feel killing that man today, with your…creator watching?”

Will scoots backward until his back rests against the headboard, needing the distance before he bends into Daniel seeking solace for the things he has done, plans to do. His head is level and straight as he peers into Daniel’s face. He has to tell him the truth. To lie will only inform Daniel of the truth anyway. Daniel waits expectantly for Will’s answer, his green eyes clear and his expression open, thoughtful.

Memories flicker of the kill earlier. Will closes his eyes and he allows the memory to take him over. The emotions of the killing resurface, a flaming thread that weaves through his mind, a chord of sorrow striking his heart.

God's terrific. He dropped a church roof on thirty-four of his worshippers last Wednesday night in Texas, while they sang a hymn.

And did God feel good about that?

He felt powerful.

Daniel’s eyes gloss over the reclining figure in front of him. A tumultuous tide surges from Will and emotions bloom within Daniel like a cloud. The tide is so raw Daniel thinks if reached out and touched Will his grip on his own emotions, his sense of self would be caught up in that tide. As quickly as the surge had begun, the rushing tide stills, and Will opens his eyes.

To look at Will reveals nothing of what is thundering about his head. Yet, beneath the serene expression and clear pools of blue the well of grief remains for all that has been lost. Will continues to resist who he has become, but he is aware he is changed, irreversibly. Daniel suspects a lot of the grief is centered in that awareness.

Will takes a breath and speaks from the dark place he keeps from Daniel, eyes fixed to the wall and dresser behind Daniel's head.

"I felt so…powerful during the struggle, no doubt in my mind that I would kill him, an almost complete absence of fear. I felt a certain…um, contentment standing over him, looking at him… fully cognizant of what I had done and knowing I had enjoyed…taking his life."

To hear Will admit it…wounds. "And before you killed him, while you waited with Hannibal to ambush him…what did you think about?

What do you think about when you think about killing?

I think about God.

Good and evil?

Good and evil has nothing to do with God.

"I thought…how good it was going to feel. I thought how…righteous a kill it would be. And…" Will wets his lips, tugs hard on the moistened flesh with his teeth, "…the irony that I was standing in an alley with the same man I had pulled a righteous gun on more than once, with the same man who had caused this wound right here…and from this the same man I took a blade from his hand to smite my enemy, *our*…enemy…the irony almost caused my mind to freeze."

God is beyond measure in wanton malice and matchless in his irony.

Daniel recognizes that Will has been shifting plenty of concepts lately. Killing is becoming easier all the time. So is judging. Hannibal's design.

"So, when you say you enjoyed it, what does that mean exactly?"

"I like the feeling of power that comes. Not the cruelty. I didn't dwell on the pain he must have felt but I was aware I was causing it. Daniel, I have been forced to kill or be killed three times. To tell people that I have killed in self-defense three times sounds…suspect. But it's true."

"This wasn't entirely self-defense, though. Killing an assassin before he kills you is different. Do you feel regret for killing?" Daniel says, trying to keep his tone neutral and not…hopeful.

"I felt regret with Randall. Regret for killing one so young and regret that he had become the animal that he wanted, but I think I gave him a fitting death. He at least died true to himself. Better than being arrested and banished to a psych ward for the rest of his life. Sometimes murder is mercy."

Daniel wonders if Will can hear himself. "You made a judgement call this time. Randall killed indiscriminately. Randall burst through your window intent on killing you. Luciano had a knife to my throat. You did not wait for the situation to become life threatening this time. Are you becoming more comfortable making those decisions?"

Killing must feel good to God too; he does it all the time. And are we not created in his image?

"I wouldn't call it comfortable." Will plucks a loose strand from the plum colored terrycloth.

I feel like you have desecrated my home.

Desecrated or sanctified? It is really a matter of perspective. He would have taken your life had you not been the stronger. You reclaimed what was yours. In blood.

“Eventually, Hannibal is going to expect more.” Daniel says, “I mean, how many times can he send people to kill you…not that the Paolini need any help, but eventually he’ll run out of Paolini. Especially if you keep killing them off.”

Will’s eyes flicker at the thought and Daniel feels the sudden flinch of excited anticipation the thought inspires. An image of Pazzi similarly flayed upon a pavement somewhere in Florence flashes through his mind quickly followed by an image of Will and Hannibal flipping a coin.

“Eventually, yes. The Trojans are but a stepping stone to the Greeks.”

Daniel marvels Will keeps the glee out of his voice. “He expects you to kill law enforcement?”

“If necessary, yes. Still in for a penny, in for a pound?”

“You’re right. This does feel surreal. I have to know…you saw Hannibal kill the other one? How was that?”

Daniel’s eyes are riveted to Will and he is experiencing what he knows must be a pale reflection of an incredibly visceral memory. The satisfaction, the sheer admiration stirs in Daniel’s chest and it radiates clear to his back and down his spine actually causing him to sit up a little straighter upon the mattress. Daniel feels his jaw tighten, his own sensibilities recoiling at the primitive chord Will’s emotions seem to pluck deep inside of him.

Daniel shifts in the bed, aware of Will’s eyes staring just as deeply into his own. A knowing glint shines in the pale blue eyes and the press of lips confirm for Daniel that Will knows how *conflicted* Daniel feels right now. Conflicted, decidedly uncomfortable, but fascinated by the forbidden fruit he is…tasting.

Daniel truly understands Will’s fear. Its taste is acrid yet electrifying. Like a kid licking a nine volt battery, the sizzling charge to the tongue elicits a sensation that terrifies and tantalizes.

It occurs to Daniel that perhaps the reason Will keeps returning to Hannibal’s kitchen in his dreams and hallucinations is because if stays there he doesn’t have to embrace the Will who survived. He could shrink from turning the next page of the score indefinitely. The chrysalis wasn’t ready to emerge from its cocoon. But, Hannibal had shattered that cocoon along with the teacup. Will has been shedding the remnants of his cocoon, peeling away its husk of fear one strand at a time. Daniel is witnessing him test his wings. And so is Hannibal.

“Hannibal is primal.” Will is saying, “Everything instinctive. Each movement necessary, fluid in its efficiency and frighteningly detached. Chef, surgeon, butcher, killer…all the same.” Will shrugs, looks aside, “Prey, dinner, but no time to enjoy it, no time to…prepare and eat it.”

“Christ, Will.” Daniel swallows and eyes the bottle of bourbon. “He was following you or them?”

“Me. He said. From the Uffizi.”

“He had been there?”

“Definitely. Said he walked right past me in the gift shop…with Alia.”

Daniel jerks and leans forward almost into Will's lap. "Will, he caught up with us in the hall of statues later, after you and I switched places in the bathroom. He must not have come into the cafeteria, must have waited outside or found us again."

"You saw him?"

"No…but I think I felt him. He is a powerful presence. But I was high as a kite, I distinctly remember feeling like we were being watched, but I never saw him."

"Then he was close enough to listen to our phone call. Knew where I was headed."

"Where did you go after we left you in the cafeteria?"

"Human Resources. Downloaded employee records. Got the flash drive from Zeller, and he will tell Jack at some point that he gave it to me."

"Where is the drive?"

"In a trash can at the Uffizi. I got what I wanted. His address."

"You're not concerned about other employees? Employees he might have replaced?"

"Not my fight. Whoever that was has already been consumed, with a celebratory toast… If he did murder for the position, it will catch up to him eventually."

"Then, that address is likely bogus. Is it in Impruneta?"

"It is. And I agree it would be too easy for the address to actually be his. But I have to check it out regardless."

"And you'll be followed."

"I can try to lose a tail, but that would look suspicious." Will says with a straight face.

"And appearances are important. Hannibal expected you to go to the museum. You would have to because he left nothing with me except the town. But he knows what he told me and that I would tell you. He expected you would make the connections you did."

"Yes. All of them. Including Lounds. And all the connections and hindsight that come with it." Will frowns.

Insight summons regret. The slump of Will's shoulders with his words sends another ache to Daniel's chest to join the persistent pricks of pain across his belly. The regret for the lie burns bright like a torch casting everything he experienced with Hannibal in a different light, drawing associations that hang like shadows in his mind.

"And he knows how law enforcement works." Will says, "They can't tear apart the entire town looking for him. He expects me to come with company this time. Pazzi will believe he struck gold. He is going to be disappointed."

"It's a ruse? To gage your intentions."

"To see whose armor Patroclus wears."

“So this trip to Impruneta is reconnaissance for you and for Hannibal. Hannibal wants you to find him, but only you.”

“He only wants to be seen by me. Yes. And he knows that if I want to see him, I will have to manage some maneuvering to accomplish it, show him my intentions are…honorable.”

“About that fence, Will.” Daniel ducks his head so he can look up at Will, stare into his face from below so Will can’t drop his gaze and avoid him. “You’ve already jumped off. This isn’t about that choice anymore. It’s about what to do now.”

“You know I’ve jumped and you are still sitting here. Why is that?” Will leans forward, presses his elbows onto the damp terrycloth over his knees. Daniel smells the bourbon warm and sweet from Will's lips. His nose is so close to those lips he can barely stand it.

“I’m still your therapist. You are still struggling.” Daniel pauses, “Not planning on killing and eating me are you?”

The pale blue eyes soften a little, as fingers rub across lips in mock consideration. “Killing you… no.” Will’s fingers find his mouth, thumbs circle the stubble over his lip and Daniel melts inside.

Damn him. “I should find this conversation beyond insane.” Daniel manages without smiling.

“Yes, you should. But, welcome to the club.” Will says, brushing the thumb over Daniel’s lips that part in response. Daniel’s breath hitches but Will pulls back and the moment evaporates.

Daniel turns his head, “I’m not sure how much longer I can pay the price of membership.” Daniel says quite seriously. He would like to know where he fits in this club, this universe of Will’s, but he thinks he already knows the answer. He is fully aware he will be lucky to survive it.

“That penny is expensive and that pound of flesh is heavier than you thought.” Will says, trailing a finger along Daniel’s neck.

“Talk about eating your words…” Daniel hangs his head as he decides to plunge ahead with the next topic he needs to put to Will. He covers Will’s hand with his, pulls it gently to his lap. “Since this isn’t about choosing sides anymore, your dilemma has shifted somewhat. You’ve got other choices to make.”

“I know. Trojans and Greeks.”

“After that. And I know you are thinking about it. Any more thoughts on *Leda and the Swan*?

“Have I forgiven him?”

“Do you understand what you would be forgiving him for? Because he does.”

Will sighs and squeezes the warm and waiting hand at his fingertips. Confession is good for the soul isn’t it?

“He wants forgiveness for taking Abigail. He wants forgiveness for what he did to me. He wants me to forgive him for…creating me.”

“That’s…an awful lot to forgive, Will. You can attribute his actions to his nature – acknowledge his behavior is consistent with what he is. You understand him, his nature and pathology. But you share it now. Can you really forgive him for that?”

As Daniel searches the pale blue eyes that blink at him mere inches away, he knows the answer to that, too. “You have already forgiven him, Will.”

“Have I?”

“Yes. If embracing all that you have become despite being aware of the source, the influence and the conditioning, and the…sacrifices - then your participation signals forgiveness; if not in word, then deed.”

“Forgiveness is not the same as acceptance, Daniel. You’ve helped me understand that.”

“No, but acceptance is close. Closer than when we started your therapy. Still twisting in your inferno?”

“Still twisting. Still hallucinating.”

“The forgiveness isn’t complete until you confess it. Your lips to God’s ear.”

“Not…funny.”

“Not meant to be. You won’t kill him. You won’t catch him. What’s left? I’m feeling like the intermediary here. Am I your therapist or your confessor, Will? Or am I the messenger from your inferno? Your conscience, maybe? Because I can’t be that.”

“The idea was to keep you out of my universe, but…it hasn’t worked out that way.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You need to decide what I am…to you. I understand that what I want and what you want may not be the same thing. You still need to work that out.”

Will stares at him quietly and Daniel knows Will wants to look away, that he feels that anticipation of regret, not the regret he has been feeling all along for dragging Daniel into his world, but the regret he will feel when Daniel leaves it. Daniel may not ever get an answer from Will, but he hopes that if Will can find words for Hannibal he can find words for him.

“In the meantime, I think you stop short of granting Hannibal forgiveness because you haven’t forgiven yourself.”

“You want to know if I’m still contemplating…an ultimate act of redemption.”

“Are you?”

When Will does not respond, Daniel sighs deeply. Will is so…infuriating. “Seems like you have made some choices. I don’t expect you to answer. You can’t. I can accept the sins of omission, too, Will. But think on this – What did Hannibal say about limitations?”

“If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn our power.”

“The same is true of your relationship with Hannibal. The dynamic between you has changed. You are no longer trying to convince him you are alike to catch him. You are too used to deceiving each other. Too used to hiding and concealing identities. Let him see you, Will. Not the version of you that you think he wants. Define this new relationship on your terms. Decide what form the forgiveness takes."

"I've been allowing him to set the expectations. Out of necessity. But, Daniel…it is his nature to exploit…weakness. He already knows a lot about me."

"Then, he is the stronger predator."

Daniel raises a brow at the nearly naked predator seated before him but for the plum terry riding his knees. The tousled mane of curls is dry and the towel does precious little to conceal the enticingly smooth flesh that is causing Daniel to feel warm all over.

"No…he is a different predator." Will insists, prickling just a little.

"How is he different? How he chooses his prey? How he kills?"

"He manipulates, orchestrates…" Will flicks his wrist in the air like a conductor for emphasis.

"And you don't?"

Daniel finds this turn in their conversation strangely comical. He shakes his head from side to side as he thinks again this is couples counseling for psychopaths. Daniel should ask Will why he doesn't see what is wrong with a relationship when the first thing you are prompted to ask upon seeing your lover is if he still wants to kill you. He decides that Will's sense of humor might not extend that far. Sometimes some things are better left unsaid.

Will throws up his hands, turns aside so that his upper body is twisted away from Daniel. He stretches, grumbling as bones settle and muscles contract and relax again. Daniel is forcing him to look in those damp dusty corners of his mind. The tether to reality stretches a little more.

"I see your point…doctor. I pretend. I pretend to pretend. I know his design. He doesn't know mine. Not really. He understands my empathy, knows how it works and he wants to see it working with him, not against him."

"Not only that. Hannibal wants forgiveness yes, but he wants a real friendship. He already knows you can mimic him. I think he's hoping the real Will argues and fights with him. Stands up to him but lies down with him, too."

"That…isn't a metaphor." Will says flatly.

Daniel takes Will's face in hands, and draws his thumb tenderly across moist lips that unfold at the touch.

"*That* means letting him in your head in a completely different context. Are you really prepared to do that?"

"It is true that we do not trust the identity we see in front of us." Will turns slightly from the press of Daniel's thumb, eyes cast down accompanied by a pensive pucker between his brows.

"In that first phone conversation, we assumed the identities of Achilles and Patroclus for this very reason. I know what he wants…guess I've known it all along."

"Will, what he wants is goose and swan, right? Nemesis is another god, like Zeus. Alike but not the same. Equals but opposites, complimentary opposites. The way the sun chases the moon and night consumes the day."

"Poetic. You think I should be exploiting his weakness for me." Will lifts his head to find agreement in the glittering green that greets him.

"You already have. You told him as much. And you lived to tell about it. His awareness that you know changes nothing. If you fail to capitalize on your advantage what would that suggest to him?"

"A lesser predator. Content to allow the other to dictate the terms." Will smiles. "You know a little something about manipulation I think."

"All psychiatry is manipulation. And there are plenty of weaknesses being exploited here."

Will's smile fades with a twinge of guilt so sharp he feels his chest contract. Daniel has made many concessions and sacrifices for Will and called it therapy when they both know it is not, not entirely. Is it exploitation when the other person is aware? A difficult question to answer when Will has been both the exploited and the offender. Does awareness relieve the offender of accountability for his actions?

Will is aware, very aware, of the implications of his answers to these questions. He makes himself look at Daniel. The green eyes staring back are warm and accessible as usual. Will smiles a little. Yes, Daniel knows a little something about manipulation.

"You'd better hope Jack doesn't figure this out." Daniel says after moment of allowing Will time to reflect. He didn't expect a response from Will, but he knows Will will think about all they have said to one another.

"Jack…understands there is a bond between Hannibal and me. He doesn't understand the nature of the bond partly because he simply can't imagine the depth or scope of it and partly because the physical aspect of it is so distracting for him."

"Will, even I can appreciate what it means when Hannibal bestows forgiveness or asks for it. Gods do not interact with mortals like that; the butcher does not ask the sheep to forgive the butchering. Jack knows those hearts in the tableau are expressions of…the heart."

"Jack did not hear the conversation between Hannibal and me in the kitchen. He was too busy bleeding out in the pantry. But, you're right. He's thinking a lot about those hearts in the tableaux. Why do you think he's letting Pazzi have a crack at me?"

Daniel rubs at his face, glances at the clock and while groaning inwardly a smile erupts between his fingers. The smile spreads unbidden as he catches the flutter of lashes as Will's steady gaze alights, as though Will sent the smile. Daniel thinks perhaps he did. He moves to stretch out beside Will on his side of the bed and rests his head atop the pile of pillows.

"I'd like a crack at you. Right now." Daniel murmurs as Will slides down to lie beside him.

Will raises his brows and looks directly into Daniel's eyes, "I'd rather have a crack at you."

Faded plaid boxers and plush plum terrycloth fall to the carpet, followed quickly by a rumpled cotton top sheet that tumbles onto the reclining Cara. She wriggles out from beneath the pile of fabric to lie on the rug. Head in paws she watches the figures move about the mattress, ears pricking at the groans and moans from the wrestling humans writhing on the bed, pulling at pillows and grabbing at each other. With no crate to hold her, the nightly routine forgotten, Bella wanders into the bedroom, yawns, and joins Cara on the rug.

Daniel grabs the mass of curls he has been staring at for far too long and wraps the soft locks tightly around his fingers. Will answers with the gentle steady press of a knee against soft curls below, nudging balls and cock and teasing gasps from Daniel. Daniel's fingers clench more tightly around his hair as Will's hands glide along smooth skin from chest to throat and back again.

"You feel…incredible." Will breathes into Daniel's neck, causing another shudder.

"So do you. I need you to be here…" Will groans into his shoulder dragging his tongue up to nuzzle Daniel's throat and mumbles something unintelligible. "Will? Will..."

Daniel tugs the curls, just a bit, so Will lifts his head and wipes a hand across his open and glistening mouth. Daniel waits until Will's mind traverses the distance back to their bed from wherever his mind had taken him just then. He watches light return as Will focuses those intense blue eyes upon his.

"Stay in the moment with me…don't…drift. Can you do that?"

"No promises, but I'll try."

The words are barely out before Will is pressing his lips to Daniel's in apology. He summons the stolen moments the two of them enjoyed at Podere Violino remembering the rapturous glow he had felt, the celebration of the newness, the near innocent lustfulness and the gentleness. And he tries to recapture those moments for Daniel now.

Kisses rain down on Daniel's face, neck, falling warm and soft in the cradle of his collarbone as the need swells in Will. Need springs from Daniel to rub hard and slick between Will's thighs, inching ever higher along smooth skin and hard muscle. Daniel bends to take Will's mouth in his, to taste and devour the bitter with the sweet, and Will takes the tongue Daniel offers between lips then teeth to hold the ripples of pleasure for as long as he can.

Daniel feels the shift in Will's attitude move through him like a breeze laced with the smell of fresh cut grass and just as sweet. Will's fingers dance across his skin, almost shyly and Daniel is reminded of the tentative touching of their first encounter. He trembles with pleasure as Will reaches down slowly to take Daniel's cock in hand. Will relinquishes the slippery tongue just for a moment to smile at the moans of delight from Daniel until the tasty tongue finds its way back in again.

Without letting go of Will's mouth, Daniel pulls open the drawer of the nightstand, his fingers fishing frantically for lube. He finds it finally and presses the flip top tube into Will's hand. The cool tingle of gel mingles with the beads of perspiration already beading upon moist skin, Will's fingers are instantly between his legs and prying his thighs apart. Daniel slides along the length of his body, until his hips are pressed against Will's, the heat between them constant as flame.

Also constant are the sure and steady notes of Pachelbel's Canon soaring in Will's head as he succumbs to the rolling waves of ocean and the gentle mist that is Daniel.

The converted antique armoire hums with the vibrations of the music that fills the entire first floor of Hannibal's villa. Its heavily varnished sides fairly quake with the full orchestral swell of Verdi's *Don Carlo.* It is the second of Verdi's operas Hannibal has listened to this morning upon rising before the sun to begin preparations for the Sardinian feast he prepares for Will.

Du Maurier will eventually roll up in her white Mercedes and saunter in, but Hannibal thinks not today. Even if the Fates should decide to send her on swifter wings, what is to be done about that? The sheer joy of watching Will take her apart with that searing wit before disassembling her with his bare hands would be nearly unassailable and, if truth be told, an eagerly anticipated outcome.

However, the Fates also hover over Greeks and Trojans, and Menelaus will be eager to chat with the viper in light of the new attack that has surely reached the news by this morning, if not yesterday. Du Maurier should have begun her seductive waltz with Uncle Jack by now stirring up doubt with every word that slithers out of her mouth. Hannibal suspects Du Maurier will be accepting a dinner invitation from Jack before accepting Hannibal's. As it should be.

Hannibal does not know if Du Maurier has phoned today or not and does not care. The only phone switched on rests on the counter not far from his work station and that phone belonged to Luciano. He will see Will today, and Will may be polite and call first, or he will swoop in like one of the little sparrows outside to explore his garden. Hannibal thinks the latter, but the phone remains within reach regardless. So unpredictable…his Will.

He has already spoken with Roberta this morning and upon hearing from her the progress with the Paolini; his heart has been filled with spitefulness, sharp and piquant as though rubbed with flecks of hot pepper and spicy saffron like the glazed and floured heart he holds in his hands.

Hannibal raises a brow as he considers the pasty organ stuffed with herbs and seasoning in his palm and quickly decides another dip in the bowl of flour and finely ground bone is required before setting it in the sauté pan. He glances at the sheets of delicate pasta glistening with olive oil that will become ravioli stuffed with ripened gorgonzola and the finely chopped remains of Lucia that did not become part of the tableau, all the delicate organs present but her heart. That heart was sent to Will, but he could not partake of it as he will this one.

The heart he sets carefully in the pan belonged to the unfortunate interloper who had the temerity to try and separate Hannibal from his Ducati in one of the parking lots by the Boboli Gardens. Hannibal had desired a heart, but opportunity and the younger man's actions had summoned Hannibal's ire and written his epitaph.

The rest of him, spiteful rude creature that he was, had been stuffed into the recesses of a subterranean utility shed where he will be found only when the pong of putrefaction at last permeates from its sturdy concrete blocks. Or, the off chance that someone might actually stumble inside for an implement or to remove the dry rotted hoses. Judging by the rusted lock on the door, the caretakers of the lush gardens have not ventured into the century old shed in quite some time. The pruning shears had been as rusted as the lock, but dulled as they had been, the blades had been sufficient to open the chest so Hannibal could remove the quaking slippery mass from its bleeding tethers and place it gently into his sleek silver soup thermos.

No, it would not do to have Will to dinner without offering his heart, at least symbolically, and then watching him eat it. The entire evening revolves around the heart; every aspect of the meal endowed with its enduring symbolism. The preparations should draw a reluctant but pleased smile from tender lips or cause an involuntary blush of utter embarrassment. Either would be gratifying.

Hannibal smiles into the pan and inhales the aroma of crackling olive oil, seasoning, and floured flesh. He had not purchased the over-sized wide mouthed thermos for the transport of organs, but for the sharing of a sumptuous meal of homemade soup or stew with his psychiatrist. The smile cracks wider still as Hannibal imagines the expression on Clayton's face should Victor Boucher show up for his scheduled appointment this week.

His thoughts turn to his conversation with Roberta earlier, the sing song cadence of her voice still fresh in his mind though the news had been less than melodic.

Negotiations go slowly, mais oui, but these people talk in circles. I would be dizzy were it not for the ire their tortuous words inspire.

I remain eternally grateful for your tenacity and patience. Is it greed that guides the negotiations?

No, mon cher, I believe the delay lies with the nature of the family. Like a bifurcated brain, the left side knows not what the right side does. Each side claims the body for itself.

The family is split between Tuscany and Sardinia. Still, the family originated from the island.

Which is why I have arranged a meeting with the reigning paterfamilias. You had no idea your actions would reach so long and so far, did you?

It would seem that neither did Mason. Where does he fit in the negotiations?

Since Mason's accident there has been a chill where Verger Enterprises is concerned. Mason offends. There is no filter when he speaks.

There never was. Only echoes of a mad father and grunts mistaken for the brilliance of Beethoven. Mason is a very sick man.

And most unfortunate you were unable to help him with therapy, but fortunate for the negotiations. Rather than offend the Sardinians with crass haggling, I took the liberty of acquiring stock from various groups already invested in Mason's empire. I believe I can persuade the old man in Sassari to accept my offer which, according to what I have learned about the family's net worth and holdings should be enough for the Paolini to buy out Verger and own their own business once again.

Roberta, I am impressed with your business acumen. I had no idea…and I am most grateful. Where will you meet old man Paolini?

Santa Teresa di Gallura, the most northern point on the island, you can see Corsica from its shores. He has never stepped foot from the island, mais bien sûr, I have been to Corsica. It is no trouble to take a meeting is such a beautiful place.

Then I look forward to good news.

He must still convince his relatives in Tuscany to accept the terms.

So you foresee a problem?

Delays perhaps. And I understand time is of the essence. I do think once the braying stops Mr. Verger will find himself searching for other pastures.

If he has the time…

Ah…since Mason is not fit for the table what are your intentions?

I imagine I will find him appropriate company with which to dine. All things considered, I may not be treating Mason alone.

If I may ask, how is your cher William?

He is well. In fact I am looking forward to dinner with him this evening.

You sound so…pleased.

I am.

Is he aware he is coming to dinner?

I think the answer to that is yes although I left the hour to him.

The wounds you have dealt each other are open still. Your banquet may not be greeted with the enthusiasm you anticipate. Patience, Hannibal lest hubris strike again.

That curse has loomed over our house too long.

Our house has paid the price of defiance too long. And you know more than anyone the cost – trop cher. Do you believe that if your William can forgive, you will be free of it?

I believe I will no longer be alone and I have learned that forgiveness brings its own reward.

And what act of contrition have you performed, Hannibal? There is offense committed on both sides.

I let him live.

Was that mercy or something more? Does he fill that void she left in your heart?

No…but he has ripped another piece from it…and I would have it back. One way or another.

And what did you rip from him?

I cannot give back what I have taken. That is what he must forgive.

You have never asked forgiveness of anyone.

I have never needed it. Or desired it.

You were quick to recognize the odor of betrayal upon his blade.

Perhaps too quickly. And the action that followed too immense against one so…alike.

Will mere words suffice? Would you recognize the taste of forgiveness should it pass your lips? Would you detect its fragrance upon the blade you wielded with such vindictiveness that you left him in a sea of blood and emptiness?

I will know. Of all God's creations, was it not Adam who brought him both sorrow and joy, in equal measure? Who would know Adam more intimately than his creator?

Who indeed? Creator and creation are so alike, so intimate, that to wound one is to wound the other. Hannibal thinks Will finds the shared intimacy a source of comfort and concern as much as he does. A dangerous thing to hold so much power over another and not know if he is friend or enemy.

Will is capable of becoming either and Hannibal wonders if it is friend or enemy who will be coming to dinner this evening. The sprig of zest he has been feeling comes and goes changing direction like the wind and Hannibal has moments when he feels tossed about on Will's sea of indecision and discontent. These are the moments when Hannibal feels Will's fingers closing around his heart most tightly. The moments when Hannibal is forced to admit to his weakness. The moments when he truly hates Will.

In love, you take leave of your senses, but in hatred, you must be present to calculate your actions.

Words spoken to Margot during a therapy session seem to sink through the crevices of his mind as Hannibal stands over the stove. He lifts the hand towel to his forehead to dab the perspiration that gathers along his brow and temples. No one but Will has ever caused Hannibal to take such a long sabbatical from his senses, nor inspired such callous calculation.

Though he looks forward to this evening he is fraught with tensions that run both hot and cold, that tug this way and that. His thoughts invariably travel to his memory palace, to one of his favorite rooms. His kitchen in Baltimore holds some of his fondest memories of Will though those memories are now bathed in blood. Hannibal's mouth twists with the irony. Will would say Hannibal had desecrated his own home. Hannibal supposes he has.

All the more reason to approach Will this evening with the courtesy and respect a rebirth deserves. It is, he supposes, a rebirth for both of them. An opportunity to rekindle the warmth between them and excavate the ruins of the universe they left behind, a necessary step if they are to resurrect and rebuild it, or some semblance of it. There is a terrible excitement that comes with creation. There should be. Enough to eclipse the sorrow of the destruction that preceded it.

He is reminded of the last meal he shared with Will, an evening filled with regrets and anticipation of regrets as each of them had been aware their universe was exploding from without and imploding from within.

Will had stood over the sink slowly washing dishes, associations clustered in his mind like the suds climbing up his arms. Hannibal had watched him dry the bowls too large to fit in the dishwasher with deliberation, his blue eyes bright though distant as he had gone through the motions of returning each of the pans, bowls, and assorted implements to their proper place. Will had explored Hannibal's kitchen enough to know where each and every item belonged, was as comfortable in Hannibal's kitchen as his own. As comfortable as Will could be with anywhere at any given moment.

The knowledge this had been their last meal together had weighed heavily on both of them, evident in the way Will's fingers had lingered over each item, had traced the shape of the pans carefully with every swipe of the towel as though he could make the evening last a little longer if he did not attack the chore with his usual gusto. Hannibal had similarly taken his time wrapping up the remains of their repast knowing that in a few hours, none of their cleaning would make any difference except to reduce the amount of clutter for the crime lab.

Tiny truths wrapped in deceptions. Truth had been so fleeting between them, another concept to twist and transform, to dissect to the degree that the particles had been too small for either of them to detect.

Hannibal had given considerable thought to Will's perceptions and interpretations that evening. Their conversation over dinner had provided some insight. Will had felt compelled to remain on his chosen path, but only now, months later, does Hannibal understand that Will had been conflicted about his choices and afraid or unwilling to take his role any further. He had anticipated regret, and dubious decisions had ensued.

Letting Fate decide is as much a part of Will's signature as surgical trophies had been the Chesapeake Ripper's. Will had been conflicted to the very end, even as he had lain cradling his wound on the floor. Hannibal remembers those eyes of his in vivid detail. And there had been a singular moment while looking into those pale blue eyes when he had almost considered allowing the linoleum knife to slip from his hands onto the floor to lie beside the weapon Will had just dropped. To take Will's face in both hands and draw him close, to wring a confession from him then and there. But that is not what happened.

Hannibal had already provided Will with opportunity to confess his sins. At the table and again later, in the bedroom. As Will had closed the cabinet and folded the towel, setting it down in its usual place beside the sink, his fingers absently tracing around the embroidered border, he had glanced toward the hall to the foyer where his keys and wallet lay in the Greek kylix, next to the statue of Dionysus and satyr he had covered with his gloves and tied his scarf around not so long ago.

You said you heard a melody earlier. Hannibal had said.

Yes, everything we've ever said and done…echoes of thoughts, dissonant chords, the harmony always…the wrong tempos I think.

Harmony requires timing. Still, the vibration of molecules is unique to us, accord and dissonance often struck in the same key. I would listen to that melody a little longer. Will you join me?

Will had followed him into the salon, his eyes huge and sad as he had looked about, his gaze finally settling on the harpsichord. He had blinked his way back to the moment as Hannibal had pressed the tumbler of whiskey two fingers full into his hand.

When Hannibal had looked up from pouring his own drink, Will was already headed toward the stairs, tumbler already to his lips. Hannibal had sighed as the hopes of an honest exchange between them evaporated with the aroma of whiskey that had trailed behind him as Hannibal had left the salon and hope to follow Will up the stairs.

Abandon all hope ye who enter here…

The pang of resignation had pricked deeply as Hannibal had paused on the stair to look up at Will dangling his hand over the banister, dark curls framing the inviting smile on his face. Despite knowing why Will had so blatantly avoided the salon, desire had also sprung and Hannibal had felt the conflict well up within his heart at the foot of the stairs. There had been genuine eagerness in the shining eyes that had swept over him from above. Dissonance and accord striking the same key at the same time.

It is that look Hannibal longs to see again.

Although sadness had hovered over their bed like some dark angel, the acts of intimacy between them had not been overshadowed by the harbinger of death; rather the awareness of impending separation had prompted an intensely focused and uncharacteristically gentle encounter.

By this time, Will had overcome his reserve about touching Hannibal. Perhaps he had felt awkward at first, or had expected a rebuff from Hannibal, or worse…laughter. Gradually, he had taken to expressing his emotions and he had allowed lips, hands, and fingers to speak for him. That last evening, Will had unashamedly run his fingers through blonde locks and trailed lips and tongue over places on Hannibal's body usually attacked rather than fondled. Will could be rather cursory in his carnal attentions, but not that evening.

Hannibal had never been reserved when it came to Will's splendid form stretched out before him.

Hannibal's fingers had wandered over Will's form, splayed belly up on the bed, legs slightly apart and arms at rest at his side. Soon the room would feel too chilly upon their skin, but the sweat had not yet dried and Hannibal had indulged his inarguably wanton sensibilities upon the silky smooth flesh at his fingertips, had savored the sight of unmarred flesh, and had noted the indulgent smile and blue eyes tinged with amusement that had beamed at Hannibal's hand resting on his stomach.

You have allowed me to become very intimate with you. There is no part of you I have not committed to memory.

Is that a…thank you?

Hannibal had pinched pink flesh between his fingers. So infuriating… *It is a statement of fact. Nothing will be the same after tonight. Are you anticipating regret?*

Are you?

Regret for the life I would leave behind? Yes.

Hannibal had pressed into the muscle at his fingertips, felt the pulse of blood surging from a strong heart. He had closed his eyes thinking Will would need that strong heart soon enough.

But you will always have your memory palace. Is Abigail in that palace?

There are many rooms in that palace, Will, and many of them are filled with regret. And I would that no more rooms be filled with it.

Will had been quiet, the large beautiful eyes searching Hannibal's, and Hannibal had felt his breath quicken ever so slightly beneath his fingers.

I could leave now without sacrifices and without regrets. Forgiveness for past transgressions given freely. Could you?

I'm not seeking forgiveness. I feel the need to follow this through.

To Hannibal's ears, Will's words had lacked their usual conviction and in hindsight, Hannibal understands the ambivalence and doubt he had been experiencing had been tearing him apart even as he had made love in their bed. Even as he had looked up into Hannibal's face at that moment.

You want Jack to see his Ripper. To see what you've become. Wouldn't he see what you want him to see in your absence?

Inference is not evidence. I remain…committed. Hannibal… Will had paused, perhaps not intending to paint his name in such pathos. *…All our conversations have been leading to this moment. I have no teacups left to shatter.*

Hannibal had tucked an errant curl behind an ear and had enjoyed the annoyed twist of lips that followed, but Will had left it there, his only other response to recline further into his pillow. Hannibal had wondered how many of Will's little gestures such as this had been part of his design and how many had been spontaneous. Hannibal supposes that the projection of Will intended for Hannibal and the actual Will had become inseparable. The lines between separating empathy from awareness had become too blurred for Will to tell the difference.

Will has been unable to separate them since. His awareness of what he has lost must haunt him. And the resentment of all he has lost in his pursuit of the Ripper has sent him to his inferno, and even there, Hannibal haunts him still.

Will had not yet entered his inferno that night as they had lain in the bed they had shared in Baltimore. Though it seems to Hannibal the three shades of Dante's gate had been whispering close by and Will had heard the whispers in his head in Hannibal's voice and had entered the Gates regardless.

Through me you enter the woeful city; Through me you enter eternal grief; Through me you enter among the lost…

Will may believe he has no teacups left to shatter still. Will had been conflicted then. His willingness to leave matters to the Fates had essentially left fate to Hannibal by default. Will had not wanted to choose; he had wanted out. Something had caused him to come to Chandal Square that night. Perhaps Will still wants out. He wants out of his inferno. What does Will believe will free him?

Hannibal pours sherry over the sautéed heart and watches the flames curl around the edges of the pan to toast the coated surface perfectly crisp. He removes the pan from the stove and watches the smoke and steam billow to the ceiling. Will has a way of setting his heart aflame. Hannibal has yet to truly know Will's heart, but he had attempted to, that night…

Do you believe I know your heart? Hannibal had caressed the smooth chest at his side. And Will had allowed him, as he had allowed Hannibal to know every part of him.

More than anyone. Will had said, turning his head toward Hannibal and lifting his hand to draw a thumb across Hannibal's lips. *Without actually touching it, of course.*

Haven't I? Truth touches us as well; plucks a chord like a finger plucks a string. Hannibal had held the slender fingers to his lips and had kissed them.

Have I plucked a chord? Will had raised a teasing brow but Hannibal had noticed the twinge of sadness surface again in the pale blue eyes.

Many more than you know. And Will, we never truly know the value of something until it is lost to us.

That…is a chord that should resonate…for both of us.

If I were to pluck you enough, would the truth resonate from those places I cannot reach?

There has been truth in every word, every note exchanged between us. Our ears are not attuned to hear it.

Then, what a tragedy it would be to lose that melody until hearts can interpret what ears cannot.

Will had blinked then, the wide blue pools had shimmered in the firelight, almost wet and Hannibal had imagined a twinge erupting in Will's chest, not unlike the ache he had felt and he had drawn him close, pulled him up by the shoulders to taste him again, to let the silken curls pass through his fingers again.

And Will had crushed his mouth against his; wrapping arms and legs around him, abandoning the tightly held reserve of a moment ago to indulge his passions, or Hannibal's…it had not mattered, then. Hannibal had ravaged the mouth he loved and then had ravaged the rest of him. And Will, his beautiful infuriating Will had managed to twist Hannibal inside out yet again.

And when they had had at last flopped back down upon satin as blue as the eyes Hannibal cannot forget, Hannibal had placed his hand over Will's stomach and lain his head upon his chest. To caress what he would ruin and listen once more to the heart he had sworn to rip out should he ever kill Will. The heart he had not been able to take.

Had God experienced such grief when he cast Adam out of the garden? God had been so devastated by Adam's disobedience and betrayal that he had turned his back on humanity. Never again would God walk with his creation in the garden, nor any other.

Hannibal had taken his grief and shoved it deep into his heart, right next to the wound Will had carved out. Hannibal thinks it impossible to ever properly articulate the pain. Will had eventually pushed Hannibal's' hand from his belly and had sat up to swing his legs over the side of the bed, every muscle painted golden in the firelight as he had moved about the bed, rummaging for clothes he still insisted on tossing to the floor. And Hannibal still pretended to be annoyed by it.

You seem enthused at the prospect of starting over someplace else, almost…pleased.

Will had spoken with his back to him and Hannibal had admired the flexing of tendons and muscle as Will had leaned and fished around for his underclothes. The words had fallen hollow, the inquiry seeming superfluous and…insulting. But Hannibal had answered honestly, hoping Will might be touched by his inflection and inspired to confess his sin.

I do not shy from what has to be done. I would rather not leave. This is my home, my practice, my life, but I would leave all of it, will leave, because of you.

A long pause from Will. *Change is – has been difficult…for me.* Will had said softly.

And Hannibal had ached inside for the missed opportunity Will had not taken. Again.

Your gift for understatement is second only to your wit. Hannibal had said, his voice edged with his usual sarcasm.

A chuckle had escaped then, laden with the gruffness often displayed in the late hours. Hannibal had always found the timbre of Will's voice pleasing, especially in the evenings. The accent became thicker, more pronounced after a tumbler or two of whiskey. Hannibal longs to hear that rich and slightly cracked voice speak softly in his ears again.

Transitions are difficult, especially for you. As your piano playing suggests…

Hannibal had moved across the satin, sitting up to tug at boxers a size too large and Hannibal had realized Will had helped himself to yet another pair of his clingy silky boxers. The thought had summoned another sad smile. These things he would miss.

Will had let go of the waistband and had leaned into Hannibal, inhaling deeply, lashes fluttering and eyes maddeningly clear and blue as he had looked into eyes. Hannibal had believed he was seeing Will clearly. As it turns out, that was not entirely true…

All the things we have ever said to each other, in those chairs at my office, and here…

Our orchestrations of carbon, yes?

Hannibal had wanted to pull him back into their bed and keep him there before his heart grew so cold that even if it roasted in the heat of his anger it would not thaw. Apparently, Hannibal's heart is not as impervious as he had thought. Will can wound or melt it with a glance or a word…

That melody you hear, Will. An unfinished symphony, the ink still wet…

Fully dressed yet reluctant to leave, an odd smile had spread across his lips and Will had leaned down to touch those petal soft lips to Hannibal's forehead, nose nuzzling his hair, *And I have many miles to go before I sleep*. He had said.

And then he was gone. Down the steps and out the kitchen door. He had walked right past the door leading up to Abigail's room where she had been lightly sedated. Precocious and stubborn, her nocturnal wandering had required pharmaceutical intervention. Fortunate that Will had slept so soundly in Hannibal's bed. Marvel that he had never awakened to find Abigail standing beside the bed. Miracle perhaps that Hannibal had found the patience to navigate through that particular storm.

Thoughts of Abigail are quickly shoved back into the recesses of his memory palace, tucked away with the other places and rooms there he never visits.

Hannibal had listened for the start of the ignition and had waited until the sound of the car engine had faded inhaling the scent left behind the entire time. Chaos had descended and Hannibal had walked into the cleansing rain.

Hannibal presses a finger to the organ laden with so much symbolism as steam swirls above the pan. He and Will are perched on the event horizon of chaos once again; vibrations fan out in all directions like the rumble of thunder before a storm. The storm he left in Baltimore has followed him across the ocean and there is nothing more chaotic than the human heart.

Will awakens to find he is alone in the bed. The room is dark, no light from the street lamp he knows is down the block reflects from the window. He staggers naked in the dark to bathroom and finds it odd that Cara isn't on the bed either. Daniel had put Bella in her crate before crashing beside him turning toward the window and groaning softly as Will had nudged his head against his shoulder blades. He had fallen asleep like that; head pressed against Daniel's back and had slept soundly until now.

The bathroom glows with the orange light he has seen before and he shuts his eyes tightly as he feels along the wall for the switch. The trembling in his fingers quiets as the overhead light comes on and Will squints but sees no night light plugged in the socket by the vanity. He breathes a sigh and relieves himself blinking until he is sure he is awake. As he rinses his hands over the sink he glances up at the mirror and grasps the edge of the vanity in shock at the sight of silky black wings hanging behind him. He turns to find downy feathers grazing the tile like a drape.

He steps barefoot and naked out of the bathroom and is not surprised when gravel grinds beneath his heels. He stumbles along the smoldering terraces of his inferno, still unused to the weight of the wings at his back. He reaches the precipice of jagged rock jutting out from the steep walls of the abyss that opens across the yard like a gaping mouth.

Trying to decide how to leave, Will?

Hannibal's voice comes warm and throaty from behind and Will feels talons score across his naked shoulders to find their way to his head, dragging across his scalp until they find enough curls to twist and tug. Will leans back to steady himself as he peers into the dark abyss.

You want out.

Yes…don't you? Will says.

You look into the abyss. Why?

That's how Dante got out. He climbed down Satan's back…

Virgil climbed down Satan carrying Dante on his back.

Whatever. Will snaps, suddenly impatient. *The point is…he climbs down through the center of the earth and out the other side…*

To end up in Purgatory.

The path to forgiveness?

Have you forgiven me?

I say the words but I'm not sure I mean them.

And I'm not so sure this is the way out. You behave as though this is Dante's inferno. It isn't. Whose inferno is this, Will?

Mine.

Why ask me the way out, then? Don't you trust yourself?

Apparently not.

You've been down here with me a long time. You must like it here.

Will laughs and the bitterness echoes sharp and cold against the rocks. The feathers shift and Will feels the talons scrape along his cheek with all the gentleness a creature such as this can muster.

Don't you? Listen…

Will hears the crackling of dry bramble and the snapping of twigs. He turns to find the viper. It slithers sleek and long, winding itself along the parched earth and around the boulder where the grey wolf sits ears pricked forward, alerted to the sound of the viper. Winged Daniel sits beside the wolf, rising to one knee, also aware of the viper's approach. One frosty white wing still dips slightly lower than the other and Will remembers their fight.

He had only been trying to keep Daniel away from the creature, from Hannibal. He has failed to do that in his other reality, too.

The viper raises its head and hisses, tongue tasting the dust and ash, licking over the fractured pieces of bone that litter the charred ground. The wolf growls and Winged Daniel begins to climb down from the boulder.

NO!

Will takes a step but feels the talons sink into his shoulders; the creature holds him in its grip. If Will lurches forward the talons will tear flesh from bone, feathers from follicles, maybe even the wings from his back.

Winged Daniel stands on the ground, wings held close to his naked form like shield as he steps carefully over the smoldering rocks, advancing toward Will and the viper that blocks his path.

"Daniel! Get back on the rock. Don't come any closer…STOP!

Daniel pauses and looks up from the ground, shakes his head at Will and offers a sad smile as green eyes alight once again on the hissing viper at his feet.

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream. Daniel says.

He stoops down to grab the viper by its throat.

NO, NO…

Will breaks from the creature's hold feeling the rake of talons through his flesh and the pain is terrible. Will falls to his knees and watches in horror as the viper sinks its teeth into Daniel's hand. Its head grows larger to accommodate the hand it swallows, growing longer as Daniel's arm, then head is swallowed by the ever growing viper. Will wipes at his face and finds blood on his hands.

The grey wolf attacks, but its fangs cannot break through the shiny scales and with a flip of its tail, the viper sends the wolf sprawling backward slamming the wolf to the ground. The wolf yelps once and lies silent and still. Will crawls along the ground toward the downed wolf, avoiding the viper. As his fingers curl around the soft tangle of fur he feels a swell of breath fill its chest. He forces himself to look at the viper.

The viper continues to swallow as white wings snap and bones crack, hips then legs disappear into the cavernous mouth of the viper. Will's eyes are stinging with tears as he turns to the red rimmed eyes luminous yet strangely dark at the same time.

You attacked before. Why didn't you attack her this time? Will's voice cracks as he stares accusingly at the creature.

Why? When you will do it for me?

You stopped me.

Did I? Whose inferno is this, Will? Yours…or mine?

Mine.

Will pushes off the ash covered earth and lunges into a run toward the precipice. He leaps. He tumbles through the abyss free falling, legs, arms, and wings useless as he plummets through darkness…

Hello Will.

Will opens his eyes to see Hannibal sitting comfortably in his usual chrome and leather chair, dressed casually in trousers and sweater facing Will. Shadows move across his face and Will realizes the stark shifting from light to dark are because the red and white curtains do not hang sedately in his office, but billow softly in the breeze that ripples through them. He sits before Hannibal in his familiar chair but they are not in his office rather they are in a tent filled with polished spears, helmets, and two cuirasses that gleam when the sunlight catches the metal.

Hannibal leans forward a little, inviting Will to do the same. *Tell me about your dreams.*

Look around. When they start making sense, I'll let you know.

Hannibal leans back into the leather, chin to chest as he peers at Will, the dark eyes drinking him up. Will tugs at his collar, unbuttons the top button and also leans back.

Tsk Tsk Hannibal chides, *Dreams prepare us for waking life. For what are you preparing this time?*

To meet you. At your house…in Impruneta.

Am I expecting you?

You sent a very specific invitation. You are probably setting the table as we speak.

You want to understand the nature of your dreams. Dreams are an expression of our fears. What do you fear about our meeting?

Weakness.

Yours…or mine?

Why would I fear your weakness?

Your empathy. You know how I feel about you. You can see yourself through my eyes. And you know that what wounds you wounds me.

You…wounded me.

We wounded each other. Do you wish to continue wounding one another?

No. I want it to end.

By it…you mean us?

This… Will waves his arms and looks about the tent. *This is unsustainable.*

I agree. Hannibal sighs and also looks around the tent. *Why do you think you brought us here?*

Here. On the shores of Aulis?

The sacrifice was made. The fleet has sailed. We are on the shores of Troy.

Will smiles. *You know why I think of the Iliad.*

We are surrounded by the Greeks. Been attacked by Trojans. Whose armor do you wear?

None at the moment.

Then you fear putting it on. Anticipating regret?

Anticipating regret is not the same as fearing it. I fear making the wrong choices. Putting on the wrong armor is only one of them.

The wrong choice would be choosing against your own best interest.

I seem to do that a lot.

You also seem to ignore the advice of your psychiatrist.

Which one?

Which one do you ignore?

Will looks aside and Hannibal clears his throat.

I'm still dealing with you and my feelings about you. Will says after a moment, fingers digging into leather.

You came here for a reason. What do the Iliad and the Inferno have in common?

Punishment. Almighty capricious deities. Hubris.

And love.

Love?

Love takes on many forms in both poems. It is personified. Deified. Expressed physically and spiritually. And through sacrifice.

Its absence eventually led to the Trojan War and Dante tries to answer the eternal question of why a loving God created Hell.

You think averting another war and escaping your inferno requires a sacrifice? You are no longer undecided and indifferent. You fear not having the courage of your convictions. Hannibal says leveling a finger at Will.

That….would be more accurate.

You think in sacrificing yourself you will find your escape, your redemption. The dark luminous eyes fill with sorrow, Hannibal's face is creased with it.

I'm considering it.

Walk with me…

Hannibal rises from his chair and gestures toward the door to his office. Will glances at the glimpses of ocean between the red and white curtains and when he turns back around, Hannibal is gone. Will walks slowly through the opened door, thinking Hannibal walked ahead.

He finds he has walked into woods filled with flowering trees and other trees laden with sun ripened fruit. His trousers and shirt have disappeared and he again stands naked in the verdant clearing inhaling the fragrance of pine and honeysuckle. The ground is wet as he walks and the air is sprinkled with the after mist of a summer rain, the sweetness still hangs in the air.

Will realizes he is walking in Eden and God should be making an appearance any time now.

Hannibal?

I asked you to walk with me.

How can I walk with you if I can't see you?

How indeed? A part of you would like to be here. With me. Do you think redemption will bring you here?

This is Eden, not heaven. We are back to the beginning I would think.

Will begins to walk among the trees, touching the bark as a warm breeze washes over his skin. He thinks he sees a stream between the branches and heads in that direction.

So it is. And yet, you came here. Full circle, Will.

I don't believe in heaven… Will ducks his head beneath a low branch and continues along the gentle slope of the hill. He can hear the stream now.

You came here because you need to remind yourself of what you intend to give up.

Did I?

Didn't you? You have awakened to who you are, to who you have become.

I have become a killer.

Yes. And you are not alone.

Will halts in his descent, looks around the forest and lifts his head up at the sky. *Sure feels like it.*

I could be standing right beside you. I am as alone as you are. We are alone without each other.

Zeus wants his forgiveness. Achilles wants his Patroclus. Aren't you curious what I want?

Always. And when you decide what that is, I'm sure you will tell me. Fate and circumstance have brought us to this moment. It is a moment of truth, Will. Why do you suppose you stand naked in the garden?

I need to peel away the layers to reveal the truth. To you?

And to yourself. Peeling away the layers of false comfort with which we cloak ourselves is necessary if we are to truly reveal ourselves.

To each other.

Yes. To each other.

Thunder rumbles suddenly and clouds gather above, dark and ominous, and Will recognizes the red tinged light that streams from the blaze of lightening that illuminates the entire garden. Will begins to run toward the stream he hears in the darkness as the pelting rain stings his skin. He stumbles along toward the sound of the stream through the flashes as branches scratch at limbs and cheeks.

At last he reaches the stream and steps off the bank into the cool water as a bolt of lightning strikes the ground and thunder booms so loudly that Will cowers in the stream and closes his eyes.

Will feels the cool rush of water recede from beneath. He hears…silence. The acrid smell of dust and decay registers before he opens his eyes and he knows he stands in his inferno once again. He stands still with eyes tightly shut, refusing to look, refusing to see the ugly landscape his mind has wrought.

I don't want to be here.

You want the garden, I know. God created heaven, he also created hell. Good and evil exist together but they have nothing to do with God. Hannibal says.

Feathers ruffle along Will's neck, eliciting shivers along his back and he shudders into the huge and powerful wings that hold him in a secure if not warm embrace.

No reward? No punishment? Will hisses into the dark.

Not from God. Typhus and swans, Will. Like cruelty, good and evil are gifts man gave himself. Concepts. We make murder and mercy. Man rewards and punishes himself.

You don't. Only rewards. You defy convention and God.

I defy everything. Because God does. And are we not created in his image?

Will feels hot breath at his throat. He licks his lips and swallows trying to ignore the heated air that fills his lungs with every breath.

And hubris? The gods don't seem very fond of that particular offense. Defying God seems to be a big no-no.

Our offenses were committed against each other. And we have punished each other. The hubris you speak of invites exclusion, not punishment.

If Adam had defied God and eaten from the tree of life before eating of the tree of knowledge, God would have rewarded him?

God would have applauded. Yes. Adam would have joined him in the garden in perpetuity as you already noted if I remember.

In your universe.

Is there another?

Why typhus and swans? God created man and lost interest?

God created Adam. Adam left the garden. Then, God lost interest.

He ate from the wrong tree. Evil was born. And good and evil reside in all his creations.

As they reside in the creator. Whose inferno is this, Will? And how long will you remain here?

Will twists against the creature, wresting his body side to side until the creature lets him fall to the gravel. Will pushes himself to his knees when the pain erupts along his spine and the tines of familiar black feathers sprout and grow until he feels the weight of his wings and sees them droop at his sides.

Adam could walk in the garden again… See the inferno become the garden. I exist in both. So do you.

He hears the shuffle of feet along the gravel and looks up to see the Winged Daniel, looking no worse for having been swallowed up by the giant sized viper not so long ago. Will rubs his eyes feeling very tired all of a sudden.

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

Winged Daniel offers his hand even as he lifts his eyes to the creature that towers over both of them. Will grasps the warm hand in front of him and is tugged up from the ground.

“Will. Will!” Daniel’s voice is edged with concern. “Wake up and look at me…”

Will feels hands not talons around his shoulders and he shakes his head. He opens his eyes, feeling dazed and disoriented. Daniel stands in front of him, green eyes large, the pupils barely a speck and his hands still clutch his shoulders. Will glances around and realizes he is standing in the backyard wearing only his dignity.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Father's Day!

Coming up: A visit to Impruneta. A pissed off Pazzi. And a dinner to die for.

ALSO: Chapter 69 on its way. Cancellation and SaveHannibal temporarily blew my mind. Hopefully we all receive an invitation to dine elsewhere very soon!

Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

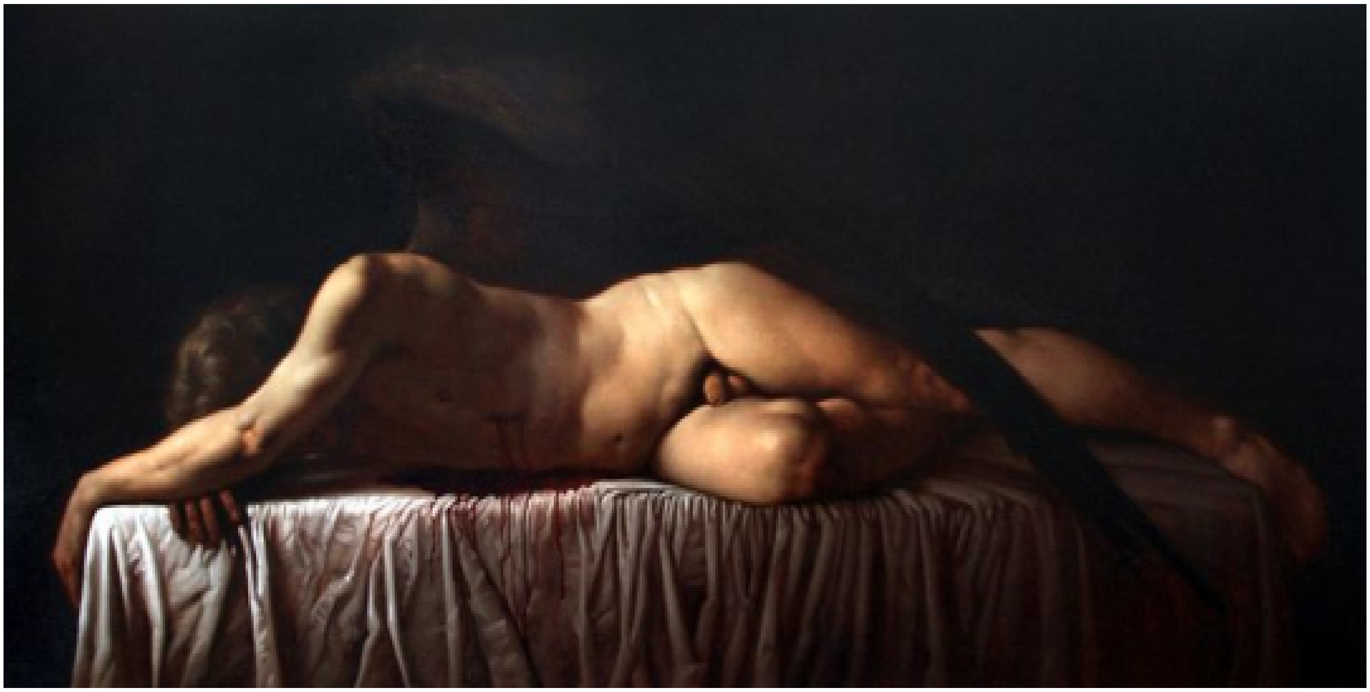
> Daniel has reservations about Will going off the reservation to Impruneta by himself. Jack and Bedelia have a chat in person. Will follows his instincts in Impruneta. And so does Pazzi.
>
> Pazzi glances up the hill. “He knew you would look for him there. This is the address you found?”
>
> “Yes.” Will says, truthfully though omitting that there had been a notation to use a post office box for mail and the phone number listed had gone directly to voice mail.
>
> Will cranes his neck to look above the manicured terraces. “I’ve never been here. I didn’t really know what to expect. These are…very nice homes.”
>
> “They are. Very expensive. Some old money around here. Well, we should go up. I’ll send a couple men around the back, just in case it’s not misdirection.”
>
> “I’ll um…just walk with you?”
>
> “As you like. We can talk some more. C’mon…let’s see if your boyfriend is home.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 69

Daniel has reservations about Will going off the reservation to Impruneta by himself. Jack and Bedelia have a chat in person. Will follows his instincts in Impruneta. And so does Pazzi.



Morte di Amore, Roberto Ferri

And all pass over eagerly here. Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so their dread turns wish; they yearn for what they fear.

Inferno, Canto III (lines 121 to 124)

Will looks up from the glistening blades of dew soaked grass where his gaze has been focused for several seconds now. He cringes at the thought that he's just revealed himself to the entire neighborhood and he thinks fleetingly of Jack's face should Jack have to drag him from the precinct in Fiesole for indecent exposure. If this keeps up, Jack will have hold of him before Hannibal does. Of course, stumbling outside in his sleep means that Hannibal already has hold of him. As though Will has ever let him go.

Sunlight streams into the yard, and Daniel's face prickles with the early morning sun and sympathy as he looks into the pale blue eyes that crease in confusion and consternation. Daniel doubts anyone noticed Will this early. Daniel's home is at the crest of this hill and even if anyone had been close enough to see, Will presents such a stunning sight that complaining would be unthinkable to any discerning Italian. Will evokes images of a finely cut Bernini with the delicate gauzy lighting of a Leonardo descending from the heavens as he stands in the morning mist. What Italian could resist a statue painted in pathos and posed among the rhododendrons and roses?

Adam in the garden.

It is difficult not to see Will through Hannibal's lens now that Will has shown him that lens. The beauty of the barefoot man in his garden contrasts sharply with the shattered mind that caused him to wander here. The savagery of the scars to the beautiful mind is mirrored in the wound that scars the body. Daniel does need to get him in the house before a concerned neighbor starts asking questions.

Will stands bewildered, hands clenched helplessly at his sides as Daniel presses the terrycloth towel he had grabbed from the rug on his way down the stairs into Will's chest so it falls over the front of him like a drape.

Will takes the towel from Daniel's hands and wraps it around his lower half in a daze. Teeth knead at his lips and he fights down the panic at this latest and unnerving loss of control.

"How did I…what time is it?" Will manages.

"It's not even six. C'mon inside."

Daniel guides him back to the patio and Will walks slowly, feet shuffling along the brick as though testing whether the ground beneath him is solid. By the time they have reached the thresh hold to the house proper Will has stopped looking at his feet.

"How long have I been out here?" He says lifting his head and turning to Daniel.

"That…I don't know. Could be as long as an hour. That is if you walked out here immediately after I woke up around four thirty or so. I think not long because Bella started whining downstairs a few minutes ago. She'll do that if I go down and start making coffee before letting her out."

"How's *your* head this morning?" Will asks walking through the French doors into the living room.

"I took some more Ibuprofen. Still tasting the bourbon though, among other things."

Will smiles slightly and rubs at his face. "I could use some."

"Bourbon or ibuprofen?" Daniel smirks at the erstwhile Adam as he fusses with the terrycloth equivalent of a fig leaf in the doorway.

"Sounds like breakfast to me." Will pads into the kitchen, grabs a bottle of water from the fridge before taking up a chair. He eases into it, feeling heavy and stiff despite the relaxing massage from last night.

Daniel slides a bottle of Ibuprofen across the table. He watches Will toss down a couple before starting on the coffee. Neither of them is going back to sleep at this point. He thinks they were lucky to get a couple hours.

"What did you dream about? Where did you go?"

Daniel plunks a couple slices of bread in the toaster, pauses a second before opening the fridge to look for the apricot preserves. He still expects to find zip lock bags filled with Luciano, and figures it may be a while before he can once again open his fridge without the memory filling his head.

"Let's see…" Will is saying, "last night I visited my inferno where I have a standing appointment, then it was off to um…Troy and then Eden."

"Busy night. Where did you think you were outside just now? Eden?"

"Inferno with you and…creature Hannibal."

"Hannibal was with you in each place, or were you alone?"

"He continues to assume many forms, but he's always there."

“Sounds like you are more than a little stressed about going to Impruneta.”

“That’s what he said.”

Daniel chuckles softly. Will knows the Hannibal in his head is an imagined Hannibal, a part of himself he interacts with in his dreams, but he must seem awfully real to Will. He supposes it is not strange for Will’s imagination to summon a version of Hannibal in order to figure Hannibal out. Or himself. Not at all strange when Will misses him and Will does miss him. He must find both comfort and insight talking to him.

“Well that’s psychology 101. Do you think it’s a good idea to go…after the night you’ve had?”

“Just one more miserable night among many.”

“Thanks…”

“You know what I mean.” Will looks up from his water bottle to find Daniel grinning, and nods at the teasing. Typical of Daniel to try and take the edge off.

“You ran into him just yesterday and look what happened. Why so soon? Give yourself time to recover.” Daniel continues as he leans against the counter, waiting for his toast.

“I don’t have time and I’m not going to be asleep in Impruneta.”

“You hope not. You lost three hours before you got here last night night…”

“Daniel, I have to go. The tension and stress will continue until I face this. Recovery…is an illusory term at best.”

“And I’m just supposed to go in to the FBI and play you. Where are you telling them you are going?”

“I’ll tell Jack I am chasing a lead. He’ll put a couple people on the Uffizi but he’ll figure that’s a dead end since I’ve abandoned it. Jack doesn’t know about Victor Boucher, unless Du Maurier told him. I doubt she has, not yet. She’s holding a few trump cards, but Hannibal is aware of them which, I would think makes them pretty worthless. She is still trying to figure him out. I’m not.”

“You’re not? What are you trying to figure out?”

Daniel hands Will his coffee, one teaspoon of sugar and two scant teaspoons of non-dairy creamer. He stirs in a spoonful of creamer into his own mug and adds another along with a couple scoops of sugar. He notices Will’s eyebrow lift at the pile of white he empties from the spoon like a dump truck unloading. Daniel realizes the source of Will’s dream anxiety is not singular, never has been, but Hannibal’s intentions are no longer on that short list. He is tempted to ask if saving more lives or taking them is on that list.

“What I want, of course.”

“What you *want* is a pretty vague answer, Will. Considering your choices.”

“You are the one telling me that’s what I need to do. Don’t want you to think I’m…ignoring your advice.”

Will pauses, takes a sip of coffee and smacks his lips, “It’s just that what I want is still pretty vague in my head. I have to go to Impruneta.”

What Will wants has become a euphemism for this last choice he needs to make. Daniel knows he wants his absolution but from which God and what form that will take remains at the heart of Will’s struggle. His dilemma with Hannibal is all about the heart and there is no amount of therapy that will help him reason this out. His heart will decide for him.

“Jack has to know you found something at the Uffizi. He’ll think that, when you tell him you are chasing your lead after leaving from there yesterday.”

“He’s already inferred that Hannibal and I exchanged meaningful words after slaughtering the Paolini. He is very aware of what I am doing. He just doesn’t know why.”

“Won’t he ask if you want back up or something?”

“Jack is playing it safe this time. He’s not going in alone. And he’s not going to go in with guns blazing. He doesn’t know what I’ll do. Until he does, he will observe. Me leaving Florence is next to impossible at this point and like I said, Jack knows one won’t leave without the other. He is containing the chaos as best he can.”

“Jack doesn’t know about Boucher being my patient or his employment at the Uffizi. That entire connection to Hannibal and Du Maurier does not exist for him. So Jack sees a potential ally in her, a counter to you should you get confused again as he likes to put it.”

The toaster glows red inside and the smell of warm bread fills his nose, a smell that summons warmth inside that spreads through his chest as he looks at Will hunched over the table, fingers circling his mug of coffee. Daniel doesn’t want to think about Will going to Impruneta today and not coming…home. He taps his fingers along the cutting board, impatient for the toast to pop up, to do something with his hands rather than clench his fists together and pound the counter like he wants to.

“He knows Hannibal intends a confrontation one way or another.” Will says, “He’ll finish what he started with the tableaux. He knows Hannibal is compulsive like that and he won’t be chased out by the Paolini. If I were Jack, I’d be considering a tactical assault from Hannibal on the Paolini.”

“Hannibal will take this vendetta to epic proportions. As in Biblical?”

“If by Biblical you mean God, then yes. An unforgivable act of hubris on the part of the Paolini. This thing with the Paolini is personal. Hannibal killed members of their family for their original offense.

“They dared to challenge Hannibal on his turf.”

“And I helped. To Hannibal, it was nothing personal at first. They went after him.”

“But you sent them. Twice.”

“No, Mason sent them. He involved them. Hannibal killed Matteo. I heard Carlo tell Hannibal that it was personal. When I woke up, Carlo was strung up on a hook, well…what was left of him. But Hannibal and I considered the matter closed.”

“I guess nobody knew what that meant at the time.”

“No. And Margot took care of the bodies of Carlo and Matteo and the truck. Mason shouldn’t trust the Paolini, either.”

“Hannibal has to take it personally now, too.”

“He’s not going to let them kill his…what’s his. On some level, Jack recognizes this. Hannibal can kill me, but he wouldn’t let someone else do it. That would be…rude.”

Daniel butters his toast, spreads a glaze of jam over the slices as he thinks. Jack Crawford is trying to manage multiple fronts right now. And do it without getting his own hands dirty or tied up in red tape. Possibly without getting Will killed. Daniel had sensed Jack was holding back when they had talked at the slaughter house, but he did not get the feeling that Jack meant Will harm. He felt a distinct sadness about Crawford, and not just the grief he carries for his wife. Will remains a source of grief, too. And guilt. And…blame. Daniel had been left with the impression that Jack Crawford is a conflicted man and supposes that conflict is only one of the legacies Hannibal often leaves behind him.

Will is virtually free to do as he pleases provided he doesn’t get caught doing it. Will does what he wants anyway, so rather than fight about it, Jack has extended the rope and Will can snare Hannibal with it or hang himself. Jack’s worst nightmare would be if Will and Du Maurier were both working against him. A complete disaster should the two of them work together, unless they both intended to take out Hannibal. There is no way for Jack to know for certain what is going on at any given time.

Daniel stirs cream and sugar into his coffee and takes a gulp. He can understand why Will doesn’t need to figure out Hannibal’s next move. He already understands Hannibal’s design. He just has to decide if he is going to be a part of it. To the end. His end or Hannibal’s?

“This rabbit hole…” Daniel drops the toast on a plate and sets it on the kitchen table.

“More like the kitchen sink. That’s a lot of distraction to muddle through.” Will says.

“Distraction?”

“From what is really going on. The Paolini do not matter. Pazzi and the Polizia do not matter. Jack and the FBI do not matter. They are all obstacles in his way.”

“In the way of what he wants. You.”

“Which is why I have to go to Impruneta. To keep the collateral damage to a minimum.”

Daniel is relieved to hear Will say this. “And Du Maurier?”

“She is…peripheral and potentially useful, or he has it in for her. I think he’s using her to mix it up with Jack for now, but there is a longer game with her. I’ll have to find out what that is. Hannibal does not exist in this universe. Everyone seems to forget that.

“Except you.”

“Except me. Jack may poke around the Uffizi himself. If he does, he will see the name Boucher and it will click with Officer Buccieri Hannibal knocked out at the slaughter house. Hannibal is aware that I could send the FBI to the Uffizi on Buccieri alone."

"That would send up a red flag of betrayal, wouldn't it? He could have chosen someone else to knock out and take a uniform, but he deliberately left another clue. For you to use as misdirection or a lead."

Daniel thinks playing this game with Hannibal is like treading a mine field. Will is navigating through it pretty well and he seems to be enjoying the challenge. Fixing boat engines somewhere in Louisiana is clearly not a career option for Will any more.

Will nods, pleased that Daniel is following along. The more he understands Hannibal, the more readily he will accept Will's logic as it applies to Hannibal's inverted universe. He looks at the plate of toast and his stomach churns. He swallows the bitterness in his mouth and looks back to Daniel.

"If Jack did go the Uffizi, his inquiry would arouse attention and Hannibal would be alerted to the official presence should he attempt to go into work or just enter the museum. Jack won't want that. He'll let me run down what I found first."

"There's still Pazzi. Hannibal may have figured Jack out, but what about him?"

"I'll have to give Pazzi some information anyway. If he wants to follow up at the Uffizi there's nothing I can do about it. That…is Hannibal's problem. If I go missing in action, Jack will bust through the Uffizi with his badge, but…it will be too late. Hannibal has already anticipated all this. Trust me."

"Do you imagine all these scenarios in your head?"

"Yes."

"How long did it take you to run all that through your mind?"

"Seconds, really. Why?"

Daniel sips at his coffee, thinking about Will's gift. His thoughts come to him in images, lightning fast images. The feeling that Will is constantly waiting for other people to catch up is pervasive. He wonders how much Will slows down for him.

"Daniel, figuring out Hannibal is…relatively easy, but usually reactive. Trying to outwit him is um…difficult and exhausting."

"And hazardous." Daniel says as Will rubs a hand over his forehead and nods vigorously in agreement.

"But, turning the tables and manipulating to see what he will do without expectation on my part is much more…fun. For both of us. For him…it will be an unexpected but hoped for pleasure. There is not a lot that happens around Hannibal that he doesn't already expect. To keep him guessing keeps him amused."

"So while you run off to Impruneta to amuse Hannibal; I report to work today, and Jack is going to do…what?"

"Jack will either leak that I'm off on my own to Pazzi or Pazzi is already watching and will follow me himself. He's arranged for a *security* detail by now."

“Only you are not chasing leads. You are following breadcrumbs.”

“And leaving them for Pazzi.”

“If Hannibal is somewhere in Impruneta, they will find him eventually.”

“Hannibal…has already taken that into consideration. He knows his days are numbered and he is determining how he leaves. He expects me to bring company…the first time. And he knows the Polizia will collect all available information, which won’t be much. All the Uffizi can do is to confirm Boucher works there. The Polizia will need a warrant to scour the Uffizi and right now they have only my word to base it on. And we all know what my word is worth.”

“You understand his design.”

“I am part of the design. But he can only predict so much. He has left some of the design to me.”

“Jack already suspects. He’ll let you, hoping you and Pazzi get him close enough to take Hannibal.”

Will nods again, “Jack may intervene at some point. His conscience is a little fuzzy where I am concerned. But I think he doesn’t like how Pazzi operates. I’ve been thinking about why Interpol has been absent and the thought that they have dealt with Pazzi before keeps spooling back. I think Interpol is working more closely with Jack than it appears.”

“You think Pazzi is under investigation from within?”

“Him or his department. I know how easy it is to bribe cops here. Bribes are endemic and likely not the reason for keeping an eye on Pazzi.”

“The reward?”

“I think so. To put Italian resources and citizens at risk for personal gain only to hand Hannibal over to an American…”

“I see your point. Not the kind of justice the Polizia or Interpol wants. They don’t want the Paolini to get him either. Too mafia. Bad for tourism.”

“Not that every tourist who comes to Italy is planning on killing people and cannibalizing them, but there has to be the reasonable expectation that laws mean something.”

Daniel sticks a couple more slices of bread in the toaster for Will. He takes out the jar of peanut butter from the cabinet. He smiles to himself thinking he can’t stop being a doctor. Will still does not eat properly and the slathering of peanut butter on his toast is likely the only protein Will will consume for the next several hours. Will may think himself impervious to the effects of his diet, but engaging in any activity on an empty stomach is not a good idea. At least the lack of sustenance won’t be the cause of any headaches he suffers today.

“But laws are limitations to Hannibal. What did you…talk about in your dreams with him?” Daniel eases into the kitchen chair facing Will to wait for the toast.

Daniel suspects the elusive messages buried in the bones and flesh of Hannibal’s *La Porcellina* and Will’s cubist *Gates of Hell* have exploded in Will’s imagination and grown into that virtual tree of knowledge in his imagination’s garden. A tree Will cannot bring himself to fell with an ax. Daniel wonders if he intends to lynch himself to it as martyr, or partake from it and walk in the garden once again, his creator at his side.

“We talked around the circles of madness that define our universe under a shroud of impending dread, with an almost tangible impatience.”

“You are tired of waiting. Your dreamscape was filled with possible outcomes encoded in your particular…parlance with Hannibal.”

“Yes. Along with plenty of implications.”

Will rubs at his jaw as he looks into Daniel’s deep and penetrating eyes. Daniel knows the fine line he walks and yet he remains. He is the piece on the board up for grabs. He is both Will’s strength and his weakness. He is…Will’s remaining tether to reality.

“There is more than one melody playing in your head, isn’t there, Will?” Daniel asks gently, not to provoke but to assuage. “One fortissimo and the other…pianissimo.”

“A very apt analogy…and so typical of you to phrase something so indelicate so delicately.” Will sighs.

Daniel has partaken of Will’s madness, his dreams, and his emotions. He has essentially tasted all that he is. He has tasted Hannibal, too. No one is twisting his arm to keep him here. He is quite capable of twisting himself and Daniel has already accepted that he will never take patients in his office again. He cannot imagine remaining here in the wake of Will’s departure.

“You are following the breadcrumbs and…remembering the notes of a particular melody as you go.” Daniel says.

Will hears the crispness in Daniel’s voice, sees the ache in the green eyes that blink back the unintended shift in tone. He shares that pianissimo melody with Daniel, and this is Daniel’s way of making sure he does not forget it. There are some things Daniel should not forget, either.

“Those breadcrumbs are tasty though aren’t they? You helped yourself to a few last night.” Will says evenly, referring to their conversation.

“So did you. Ate more than crumbs. Not…tasty enough?” Daniel returns.

“Very…tasty. But the other crumbs get tastier all the time, don’t they? I know how…seductive that taste is.”

“Those are your feelings, Will, not mine.” Daniel says, tiring of the metaphors being bandied about. Hannibal may prefer to communicate this way, but Daniel does not. Not this morning.

“And your response is to keep coming back for more. Vicarious experience. Vicarious pleasure. That’s how it begins…”

“Is that what’s happening here? I’m your therapist, not the other way around.”

Daniel’s mind begins to reel with parallels to what is happening now between them and all that has happened to Will and the anger welling inside is quickly quelled by panic and fear. He senses something similar in Will as he sits across from him, holding his mug between fingers perhaps a little too tightly.

The toaster pops and both of them startle in their chairs, but neither makes a move to get up. Will's eyes are intensely blue as he reaches a hand across the table to touch Daniel's wrist.

"It doesn't have to happen. It's why I keep you at a distance, Daniel. You're not innocent, but neither are you guilty…of anything you can't take back."

Daniel squirms in the chair, toes curling as his feet grip the floor. He is twisted up inside all over again. Will twists him up inside. The allure of joining him is so strong, as strong as the fear of regret, of hating himself and Will should he give in. The struggle Will contends with every moment, whether awake or asleep is suddenly so clear. He is not feeling Will's pain. The heavy ache in his chest is his own.

Daniel recognizes one glaring distinction between his relationship with Will and Will's relationship with Hannibal. Hannibal wants Will in his universe.

The chime of Will's phone drifts down the stairs and Will's head snaps in the direction of the steps. He looks at Daniel who offers a weak smile and squeezes his hand once before letting go so Will can get up.

"Showtime." Will says, knowing that the caller is Jack.

As Will bounds up the steps Daniel retrieves the tepid toast and smothers each piece with peanut butter. He knows Will will indulge him and crunch it down anyway. And Daniel will revel in the little things since the big things looming at the edge of their event horizon of chaos are far beyond his control. The melody they share grows faint, but Daniel is determined not to let it fade completely.

After making sure that he was not followed into the café on the second floor, though very likely observed walking into it, Jack settles into the booth with his newspaper. The café overlooks the Piazza Repubblica and Jack can see the colonnade and entrance to the building where the FBI's headquarters is located. Doctor Clayton should be arriving sometime soon and Jack will see him when he does.

Hopefully, so will his lunch guest if she is on time. Jack would very much like to see Du Maurier's reaction to Will's doppelganger. Clayton should be a convincing double for Will at this distance. After talking to Will this morning, and inferring from Will's stumbling narrative delivered with enough vagary to relieve Jack of both complicity and conscience, he had granted Will the latitude to follow his instincts.

He had not alerted Pazzi, not in any overt sense anyway. When Pazzi had called to check in and inquire about Will's whereabouts, Jack had merely told him Will wasn't coming in today. Jack thinks the entire purpose for Pazzi's call was to seek oblique clarification for following him. Jack can only hope that Will's deliberate evasiveness is more about preserving their tacit agreement of keeping Jack's nose clean than undermining the fragile trust between them.

Will had not mentioned taking a weapon along, and neither had Jack. If Will needs to protect himself, Jack would rather he shoot than…eviscerate.

Will's interpretations of the murder tableaux are plausible, but not entirely believable. Jack thinks Will is avoiding certain implied messages because he understandably does not want to entertain them. At least to Jack. Jack has considered that Will may be as uncomfortable with the insinuations and implications of his association with Hannibal as he is. He may have been trying to put all that behind him until the tableaux reintroduced all those associations. Will is also capable of denial despite his gift.

It seems to Jack that Will's gift, his empathy is not a pure thing. Will has always seen and felt the world through multiple perspectives and his imagination has to be influenced by his own as well other's feelings, imagined or not. Jack let him get too close, but Will wanted to get close. Why he wants to get close this time only Will knows.

The trauma of his last encounter with Hannibal has no doubt affected Will's empathy in ways Jack cannot imagine. If Jack was to adopt Pazzi's interpretation, and Jack does not discount that interpretation, Jack would have to take a dim view of each and every one of Will's actions. He thinks the truth lies somewhere between what Pazzi thinks and what he hopes.

He considers again the Ukranian dish of Kholodets Hannibal had served up one evening, close to the end. The gelatin likely made from ground human bones, *aspic is derived from bone as a life is made from moments* Hannibal had said. Whose life and whose moments had Jack been dining upon?

I have to confess that I don't know who's pursuing whom any more than these fish do.

Whomever is pursuing whom in this very moment, I intend to eat them.

Jack lets his head roll back against the cushion remembering. Hannibal was not one of the little fish. He had not placed himself in the fish bowl of gelatin laced with the miniscule mementos of a stolen life. He had always been standing outside of the chase, the fish being Will, Jack, and anyone else in pursuit. Hannibal had served up a metaphor of the moment and Jack had missed it. Then, as now, Hannibal does not see himself a participant in the chase…he watches from above.

All I want to do is catch him.

He's given me nothing, Jack. Nothing actionable. He has confessed to nothing. He's acknowledged only vagaries.

I need more than vagaries. You have killed someone, Will.

Who was trying to kill me.

I don't know if I can prove that.

Jack should have stepped in then. Should have realized that he had essentially told Will he was screwed either way in so many words. If Will had been feeling isolated in the world he had created with Hannibal, Jack had certainly contributed to it. And Jack had not known the half of it. Jack cannot wrap his head around what Hannibal was doing with Will to gut him as he had.

How much of their plan had Hannibal been aware of? At what point had it fallen apart? Had he and Will been deluded all along? Or had Will been contemplating a plan of his own?

He had been angry at Will, frustrated with Will's failure to bring him actionable evidence and unwilling to admit to himself the possible reasons for the dragging of feet and the ambivalence except to point a finger at Will.

Don't let empathy confuse what you want with what Lecter wants.

He had been too eager to catch Hannibal to really pay attention to Will. And he had been too eager to listen to Du Maurier. He had given in to doubt and he had confronted Hannibal alone. Without considering what Will might do.

Jack unpacks his guilt as he looks up from his iced tea. He unpacks it every once in a while and spreads it out so he can take a good hard look at it before he packs it up and makes sure it still fits in the sizable trunk he hefts with him. He keeps a lock on it when he is with Will.

Will has learned too much with Hannibal, and from Hannibal. Jack thinks to let that guilt find a place in Will's toolbox of manipulation a huge mistake. He had offered Will a way out more than once and Will had not taken it. Jack had borrowed Will's imagination, but Will had eagerly subjected himself and his imagination to Hannibal after his release from BSHCI. The mangled imagination that remains was Will's design, not his.

Jack allows thoughts of Will and his motives to slide aside as Du Maurier's diminutive figure breaks away from the herds of wandering tourists below. She walks across the piazza with purpose, hips swaying and face hidden beneath a wide brimmed and stylishly striped sun hat. Jack pats the immunity agreement, the revised immunity agreement on the cushion beside him. Jack thinks if she wants to get out of Florence she will agree to the terms. Otherwise, Jack is perfectly happy to let her tangle with Hannibal on her own. She has clearly been able to survive without the FBI.

He had touched on the topic of Du Maurier again this morning with Will on the phone. He had not disclosed his meeting with Du Maurier today, but he had picked Will's brain about her possible motives should the blonde hair from the tableaux turn out to be hers.

Will's insight had made sense, and Jack is inclined to agree with Will's assessment on this particular aspect of the case. Du Maurier's concern for anyone but herself is disingenuous at best, and at worst, is evidence of Hannibal's influence though lacking any of the attachments or affection Hannibal might have had for his former friends from home. Du Maurier sees only opportunity. She protected Hannibal until it became inconvenient. And even then, she offered only enough to grab her immunity deal.

What did she say to you before she left, Jack? You've never told me what she said after I left Quantico that day.

I told you she warned me that Hannibal might be on to us.

You told me that…later, in the hospital. What did she say about me?

What did you say to Hannibal when you called him? You've never told me that either. You've never even tried to explain or offer a reason for Abigail being there.

I think you have inferred enough without the benefit of confirmation. I saw her alive for mere seconds before he killed her in front of me. I told you, I don't remember much more than that.

That's what you keep telling me. What Du Maurier said about you and Hannibal I think was accurate in light of what happened.

Which was?

That perhaps Hannibal knew you better than you knew yourself. And at the time…I think that was true. What I want to know is if that is true now, Will.

We learn from our mistakes, at least we're supposed to. I'm trying not to make any more mistakes. That's as true an answer as I can offer, Jack.

Then, I'll have to accept that. Happy hunting…

Jack rises from his seat as the server guides Du Maurier to her seat. Du Maurier nods graciously and slips gracefully across the vinyl cushion, a serpentine movement, and practiced. The lithe young man with the black bow tie and laundered linen apron presents a menu before leaving them alone and only then does Du Maurier remove her sunglasses.

She turns her sapphire eyes to Jack, and Jack is struck by the color as much as the frosty glint that emanates from them. They are as calculating as…Hannibal's. Immediately, as though realizing she exudes about as much warmth as the marble pillars that line the dining room where they sit, Du Maurier's affect changes with the slight relaxing of shoulders and the incline of her head.

"Doctor… I'm pleased you could manage to meet me." Jack says flashing a polite smile.

"Taking a meeting so close to your temporary headquarters was unexpected, but I understand you too have appearances to keep." Du Maurier notes the scarring about his neck but makes no comment.

"And where is Hannibal today?"

Du Maurier sips from her glass of ice water, fingers hovering over the lemon rind and offers Jack a tight smile.

"I assume tending to whatever wounds he might have acquired from his…altercation yesterday. Tattle Crime reports the victims were related to the victims of the murder tableaux. More Paolini?"

Jack grimaces and wonders how Lounds manages to get her information and post it…while horizontal. "You heard about that. The names will be released eventually, but yes." Jack says as the smile fades.

"Hannibal…and Mr. Graham?"

"How much do you know about Hannibal's association with the Paolini?" Jack takes a couple gulps of his water, his mouth suddenly dry.

"As I said, Hannibal told me that they are relatives of people he killed in Baltimore. A crime family with ties to Mason Verger, or at least they are business partners. Mr. Verger apparently deals with some unsavory people…in his business."

Jack chuckles and thinks Hannibal must enjoy trading in artifice and subterfuge with Du Maurier. Pazzi would not know what to do with her.

"And why would you think Will has anything to do with it?"

"I am aware of Mr. Verger's unfortunate accident. It happened while Will Graham was in the thick of his undercover assignment with Hannibal did it not?"

“It did.”

“Somehow the Vergers piqued Hannibal’s curiosity. And Graham’s. Whatever happened, the Paolini must have been involved. It really is a matter of simple deduction.”

Jack doubts it all that simple but he decides to thaw the ice queen seated across from him with a tentative treat. “I have deduced from Will’s statements that he realized he was being followed and took measures to protect himself. Hannibal showed up and took out the other one. What do you make of that?”

“I would think it means that Hannibal still has designs on Mr. Graham and until that design can be realized, Hannibal is allowing no one to interfere. The injury done to the victims was not only fatal, but particularly gruesome. How did Mr. Graham feel about it?”

“Suffice to say, he was confused and not sure how to interpret Hannibal’s presence.”

“And you believe that.” Du Maurier sips at her water, eyeing Jack over the top of the glass.

Jack ignores her and plunges ahead. He wants answers to his questions, not provide insight to Du Maurier. “Have you been in contact with Hannibal?”

Du Maurier sets down her glass, long polished nails trace the lip of the glass as she speaks, “By phone, but not since the news about the bodies in the alley. Via delle Farine is a few blocks from the Piazza Repubblica. They were following Mr. Graham, not Hannibal. Was Hannibal following the Paolini, or Mr. Graham?”

“No way to know that. Will did not see Hannibal until he was under attack in the alley.” Jack strangles the irritation he feels rising at Du Maurier’s impertinence.

Footsteps echo from behind and Jack pauses as the server returns for their order. Du Maurier orders only a glass of white wine. Jack orders more coffee and a plate of the house pasta, meatballs and red sauce. A quick and simple choice, Jack rattles it off without a second thought.

Du Maurier thinks Crawford’s appetite unaffected by his association with Hannibal. He seems to Du Maurier unchanged by his experience and except for the scar at his throat, remarkably unremarkable. He remains as inaccessible as ever. She supposes his attire an accurate reflection of his character and personality. His ensemble is understated and dignified, Armani she thinks. Crawford is efficient. He practices efficiency and demands it from others. He likes precision and he is uncomfortable leaving things to chance. Qualities he shares with Hannibal. He must have found Hannibal’s fastidiousness and polite reserve appealing, at least initially.

Graham must drive him crazy. Crawford must know what a keg of dynamite Graham is. How easily all this can blow up in Crawford’s face. Crawford’s suit says nothing about his deep seated denial.

Jack waits until the server is out of earshot before laying the manila folder on the table, leaving a finger upon the blank envelope as he lifts his eyes to Du Maurier’s.

“You know where he lives. You don’t live with him, but you know where each other reside.”

Du Maurier glances at the large envelope containing her immunity agreement and ponders the possible caveats Crawford has introduced this time.

“We do not share a residence that is true. We maintain our boundaries…precariously.”

“We could apprehend him at his home. No need for Will to be involved at all.” Jack says, curious if Will’s assessment of her pans out.

“He’s already involved. Hannibal spoke to him with the murder tableaux, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“Are you satisfied with Mr. Graham’s interpretation?”

“Will is aware of Hannibal’s pathology and his influence. The tableaux were complicated.”

Du Maurier offers a patient smile. Crawford is stubborn about slipping anything useful regarding Graham. “Perhaps I can offer an alternative point of view. I have been here in Florence with him, Mr. Graham has not.”

Jack decides she is either fishing, for Hannibal or herself Jack has no idea; or she already knows about the tableaux as the blonde hair suggests and is trying to convince Jack she does not.

“I can’t discuss the crime scenes with you.” Jack says.

Du Maurier sighs and allows a twinge of regret to pass over her otherwise smooth features. “Did Mr. Graham arrive with you?”

Again, Jack can’t be sure if she already knows about Will, or if she is fishing…

“I’m not going to disclose any information about Will to you. Neither am I telling him about meeting with you, or what we discuss.”

“You aren’t entirely sure who is chasing whom?”

Jack chuckles and grins. He feels for a moment like he talking to Hannibal. Her words are delivered with her usual tone, perfectly enunciated but flat and unanimated. The word choice gives Jack pause. His entire being tells him Du Maurier knows a hell of a lot more than she lets on.

The server returns with Du Maurier’s wine and pours a stream of scalding hot coffee into Jack’s cup. Du Maurier gazes out the window at the piazza and the shops nearby and blinks at the slender form and curl laden head that passes beneath the arched colonnade to their right. Will Graham wears a dark blue suit and sun glasses, but the walk is unmistakable. He walks with head down avoiding eye contact and shuffling along the sidewalk rather than picking up each foot completely from the ground before the other follows suit. She turns to Crawford and nods toward the window.

Jack smiles and he glances out the window at Clayton who enters the building and disappears from sight. He pulled off mimicking Will quite well. Clayton had phoned a couple hours ago to say he was running late and Jack had told him to arrive no later than eleven thirty. Clayton had sighed into the phone but had agreed. He looks at his watch to find it is eleven twenty seven. Jack imagines he had not left before Will and had likely seen him off to where ever it is Pazzi will find him.

Jack thinks it unlikely that Pazzi will find satisfaction today. Will is aware of Pazzi and if Will wants his private time with Hannibal, he would not be leading Pazzi to him today. Jack does wonder what Will is looking for today. Perhaps Will is trying to persuade Pazzi that following him around is a waste of time. Jack is perfectly fine with Will wasting Pazzi's time and not his. If they do find Hannibal, Pazzi has a battery of Polizia at his command.

"I uh…do keep an eye on Will." Jack says. He places the manila envelope on the table in front of him and folds his hands over it.

"Are you sure just one is enough?"

Du Maurier sips at her wine, returns the glass and looks to the manila envelope wondering how much longer Crawford is going take. While she is gratified Crawford seems to be keeping Graham on a short leash, she would prefer not to be so close while he is on that leash.

Jack slides the envelope across the table to Du Maurier. "You said Will was not my friend."

"He's not."

"I say he is…but, let's assume you are correct about him. My best chance of finding out is with this immunity agreement."

Du Maurier raises a brow as she tips the wine glass and drinks deeply, feeling the cool crisp rush down her throat. She swallows, as she sets the glass down and takes her time unfastening the clasp. Crawford waits while she reads. She sips from her glass once more before looking up into Crawford's unreadable face.

"This is only valid if you apprehend him with my cooperation."

"If we catch him through some other means, some other lead…like Will, there is no agreement."

Du Maurier allows herself a moment to relax, willing herself to stillness in front of Crawford. He has definitely learned from past mistakes. He trusts no one.

"Since you know where he lives, you are going to lead me there when you can arrange it."

"You want me to wear a wire?" Du Maurier inquires with all the reserve she possesses.

"No. Too risky considering your intimate influence." Jack reaches into his jacket pocket and produces a small device. "This is a GPS tracker, operates in real time, and is even waterproof."

Du Maurier watches Crawford drop the nearly matchbook sized tracking device onto the ceramic surface of the table. It is slimmer than a matchbook, and sleeker than similar devices she has seen for consumers. The military and law enforcement do keep the nicer toys for themselves.

"How does it work?"

"It is already synced up to an interface. All you have to do is turn it on. This allows you to keep your privacy while delivering Hannibal. One thing though, once you turn it on; it stays on, so be careful when you decide to do that. You will phone me in advance. Anytime. It does not matter. My team will pick up the activation signal and voilà…instant back up."

"I am impressed Agent Crawford. You would allow me to retain my anonymity here?"

"For a while. A short while. I have to allow you some freedom of movement. I do not need federal agents on the clock following you on a shopping trip. You would find leaving the country difficult if not impossible and of course, Hannibal might miss you. I might be inclined to let him find you should you…disappear."

"And neither of us wants to alert Hannibal that I have this device." Du Maurier manufactures a smile as wooden as Crawford's.

"No, we don't."

"And Mr. Graham?"

"What about him?"

"Did you place a tracking device on him?"

"Why would I?" Jack nods his head toward headquarters.

"Suppose when you arrive at Hannibal's home, you find him there?" Du Maurier fires off another salvo of doubt.

"You honestly believe that likely?"

"Each of them is lonely, Agent Crawford, in their own way. They understand each other. Who among us does not desire to be understood? Which of us would not be seduced by that kind of acceptance?"

"Hannibal manipulated insight with Will, pushed him into situations to see what he would do. Will dissociated sometimes."

"Situations Mr. Graham willingly exposed himself to."

"Did he? Or was Hannibal's influence so profound, so insidious that Will can't help it?"

"If that is the case, Agent Crawford, he is already lost to you." Du Maurier allows her eyes to soften with compassion. She furrows her brow and looks wistfully out the window where Graham had passed by moments before.

"How do I know you aren't already lost?"

"You don't. But I am the one offering to take you to Hannibal in exchange for immunity. What did Mr. Graham ask for?"

"I want to believe Will is not completely lost." Jack says, mentally applauding the bravura performance before him.

"Sometimes we want something so badly we imagine we see it everywhere we look. Hannibal and Mr. Graham want things, too."

"Sounds like you understand Hannibal and Will pretty well. Hannibal must have a particular understanding of you. Enough trust not to…"

"Kill me? Each relationship Hannibal makes has its intrinsic value. However, Hannibal has never sent me his heart. That is what he sent Graham isn't it? Fractured valentines in the broken bodies of the Paolini?"

Jack thinks Du Maurier unaware of the connection between Verger and Will. Du Maurier must be aware of Lounds' assertion that the tableaux are actually love letters between two killers she wisely did not name. And yet, Du Maurier has not brought it up. Which could mean she is not aware of how long Will has been in Florence. Unless she assisted, she could not know what the second tableau looked like, but the fountain Hannibal had made of Lucia had been in a more public place and photos had surfaced despite best efforts to stop journalists and civilians from access to the crime scene.

Jack rubs his eyes briefly and ignores the pounding at his temples.

"Maybe as his former and…current psychiatrist you can offer me some insight about his pathology. Or do you still wish to claim doctor patient privilege. "

Du Maurier nods at the agreement in her hands. "Of course."

"The tableaux were very Dantesque. Allusions abound in each. How does Hannibal's pathology fit Dante?"

"Dante became the architect of Hell for his time and his design lives on. Dante was seeking to understand God. Hannibal takes inspiration from Dante for his own design."

"Of Hell?"

"Of fitting punishment from his point of view. Do the tableaux refer to the Inferno directly?"

Du Maurier's tone is conversational, politely curious. She is all too familiar with the mythical universe Hannibal inhabits with his equally mythical Graham. Crawford is but vaguely aware of it and would likely be surprised if not flattered with his place in it. There is not much room in Hannibal's mythos for anyone but himself…and Graham.

Du Maurier sighs. The wine flows down her throat.

"Very direct according to Will, and I concur with his assessment."

"From what I know of Mr. Graham, and this is almost entirely from what Hannibal has told me about him, I think he seeks a way out of the inferno Hannibal has sent him to. The cost of exposing his mind to Hannibal. What he intends to do about that only Mr. Graham knows."

Du Maurier collects her purse and moves to rise from her seat, her wine glass drained. Better to leave Crawford wanting more, than walk away and leave him with only the huge sack of doubt he slags over his shoulder.

Intrigued by Du Maurier's comments, Jack decides to ask one more question. "If Hannibal thinks Will is still his killer, despite what he has done to him, how would he go about determining that this time?"

Du Maurier allows her eyes to widen with surprise. She thinks Crawford already suspects Graham may answer Hannibal's tableaux with one of his own. The reporter of Tattle Crime may not be far off base. If Graham made a performance of killing his attacker for Hannibal, the next step would be to impress him with a creation of his own. Florence will be awash in bleeding hearts.

"The sort of influence required to…resurrect those impulses in someone with Mr. Graham's unique skill set would require a severing of social ties, a near total exclusion from normative society… isolation."

"Prey upon his loneliness."

"I have paid the price for my social ties. You left him alone before. I would not make that mistake again." Du Maurier says suspecting that is exactly what Crawford has done, despite his claims of surveillance. Graham's hunt for Hannibal knows no bounds. He won't be deterred by the FBI and Crawford knows it.

"Agent Crawford?" Du Maurier lifts her head suddenly as though remembering something. "If Mr. Graham has been aware of Hannibal's influence the same holds true of yours."

"Mine?"

"You knew what continued exposure of his particular sensitivity to Hannibal might do to him. You exploited him, and in the process let him destroy himself, at least a part of himself. In Mr. Graham's estimation, you may be as culpable as Hannibal, perhaps more so…as his friend."

Jack lifts his head, heavy as it is, in answer to Du Maurier's provocation. "I take my share of the blame for what has happened. We all made sacrifices. Informed sacrifices. Will can walk any time."

"You should continue to tell yourself that, Agent Crawford, it seems to be working for you."

"Thank you, for your insight and…cooperation. Don't forget the tracker." Jack nods to the tiny black device on the table. "And to call before you engage him and activate it."

"Successful capture is required, isn't it?" Du Maurier picks up the device and slips it into the envelope.

"All or nothing. That's the deal." Jack says.

"This may not end how you imagine, Agent Crawford." Du Maurier says, sliding sun glasses back in place.

"I have no illusions about that. *Buana giornata*, Doctor."

"*Fino alla prossima volta*." Du Maurier inclines her head, gathers her purse and manila envelope containing agreement and tracker, and promptly walks out of the dining room. Jack watches her leave and smiles as he stoops to pick up the strands of gold from her cushion. He sighs as he looks at the wine glass wondering if it will fit in his inside pocket.

It is not a long ride to Impruneta from Florence, the route the cab driver has taken passes the Boboli Gardens and the Palazzo Pitti, the highway runs parallel to the area where Will's former residence had been. Will barely glances in that direction his mind churning with thoughts of a future hanging by a thread to events of his past, like a balloon on a string he holds in his hand.

He finds himself thinking of the music playing while Mason had sat oozing blood and saliva all over his living room. It had taken Will several minutes to even notice music playing, and another minute or so before realizing he was hearing his own stereo. Hannibal had queued up a playlist of sorts from Will's collection, complaining about the absence of opera but satisfied with what he had found. The bulk of Will's meager classical assortment had hummed from speakers almost too dated to accommodate the volume, but Hannibal had cranked it up anyway to provide Will with a proper soundtrack as he had stood outside on the side of the shed listening to Faure's *In Paradisum* while the ruined chair and carpet remnants from his desecrated domicile smoldered in flames.

Hannibal was always doing thoughtful things like that for him.

Hannibal has his musical attachments, a preference for the Baroque and the obscure. Will shares with him an appreciation of Classical music, although listening to opera is not as pleasing an experience for Will as it obviously is for Hannibal. Reading the librettos in English while listening to the operas had been tedious, and though Will had delighted in the stories, sitting through an actual opera performance wearing a tuxedo was not on his bucket list. Will has since made a few concessions.

Bach is a personal favorite for both Hannibal and Will, the Brandenburg Concertos bearing particular significance. Will lays his head back along the cushioned rest of the back seat and tries to imagine what soundtrack Hannibal had been playing during their altercation with the Paolini. Will sometimes hears music when visiting his memory palace with Hannibal, but he knows Hannibal's palace is filled with music and memory. He thinks Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* might have blasted through Hannibal's ears and then thinks perhaps that selection too obvious, too trite. *Carmina Burana* comes to mind, the Greek inspired Orff opus would be the sort of ostentatious piece Hannibal would play in his head to accompany the herald of a new day, the resurrection of desires and hopes thought lost. The theme of unrequited love inverted and overcome for his pleasure.

Their joint attack on the Paolini must have pleased Hannibal to no end. A shared hunting trip such as the one they indulged in yesterday…and it was only yesterday Will reminds himself as the concept of time becomes as blurry as the scenery blowing past the window...had been the fulfillment of a long awaited dream. Their *merciful* treatment of Mason had only approached the sort of collaboration that Hannibal envisions for them. Hannibal must have been hearing something absolutely majestic while severing the doomed Paolini's carotid artery and watching the spray burst forth from his quivering throat to finally bubble from the wound and drip onto the concrete.

The somber and delicate notes of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* play on an endless loop in Will's' head as he thinks of shifting concepts and he feels the sensation of sand slipping through his fingers as he imagines picking up a spear on the shores of Troy. He dusts off the spear, sprinkling sand over the beach. The sand shifts beneath his sandals and wind blows across the deserted dunes, granules float past his eyes as the passage of time seems to slow and roll backward.

Will walks into in the shadows of Hannibal's kitchen in Baltimore as lost moments of his past unfold around him and he watches through the slits in his eyes as the Tuscan countryside disappears from the window.

He sits in Hannibal's breakfast nook across from the pantry but the floors are not soaked in blood, rather sunlight trips across the table and Will squints as Hannibal approaches. He holds the sleeve of his robe with one hand as he refills Will's cup with steaming frothy coffee that carries the scent of cinnamon. Will leans back against the chair, the feel of the borrowed silk pajamas lusciously cool as the fabric glides across his skin.

You sleep so much better here. Why do you think that is? Hannibal had asked, easing into his chair and immediately adopting the erect posture Will finds both odd and endearing at the same time.

Will had stirred sugar into his coffee, watching the crystals disappear as he had answered, *Maybe I feel more comfortable dreaming what I dream here.*

No waking from cold sweats here since Tier. Hannibal had noted with a pointed preeminence that Will had found vaguely annoying.

I never slept here before Tier.

Hannibal had lowered his eyes, seeming to find something amusing and then had cleared his throat, the thought brushed aside with the sound, a habit of Hannibal's he seemed unable to break and one that Will had noticed among his many other nuanced behaviors.

Your dreams do not torment you here, your subconscious is at ease, and perhaps less conflicted?

Will had grumbled in agreement and had selected a croissant from the basket between them, spooning dollops of red raspberry preserves into the feathery middle before sinking his teeth into its flakey crust and watching Hannibal watch him the entire time.

Do you talk in your dreams, Will?

Not often, I dream mostly in images.

Will had licked his fingers, one by one before shoving another piece of raspberry drenched crust into his mouth. Affection or amusement had flickered in the dark eyes and Will had flushed warm, liking the feeling and hating that he enjoyed that warmth so much.

Images you interpret during or after you wake up?

I am processing all the time, and sometimes…the dream changes as my thinking changes. Ideas become images taking on the aspect of the…emotions I am experiencing.

Fascinating. And fascinating that you understand yourself so well. Hannibal had shaken a silver canister of confectioner's sugar over his croissant and taken to it with knife and fork, lifting a brow at Will's sticky berry glazed fingers.

Dreams offer an alternate reality. An underrated window into the subconscious that most people ignore.

Not everyone dreams as you do. But, psychoanalysis along with dream interpretation remains a dead religion. What did you dream about last night? About Mason.

Hannibal had leaned closer across the table, his dark eyes creased with his relentless curiosity and with the undisguised glow of that unflinching affection he reserved for Will. Will had rubbed a slippery satin napkin across his mouth and had massaged the preserves from his fingers as he had contemplated an answer for Hannibal. He had been hesitant to disclose too many glimpses into his dreamscapes. Hannibal was learning more about him all the time even as Will was learning about him. To Will, it had seemed an uneven trade-off. It still does.

I dreamed of chasing a stag through a dark snowy forest into a barn where the walls dripped blood. The stag stood by a lever and wheel, the links of chain smothered in rust. I turn the crank so I can pull up the hook from the depths of the pit in the center of the barn. It's Mason, savaged by his pigs, a mass of tissue and bone unrecognizable but for the tufts of blonde hair hanging from the tendrils *of pink skin. I tie off the chain and walk toward the suspended corpse. It seems to move, to pulse, and I see maggots, but as I get closer I realize the squirmy white things aren't maggots at all. They are writhing cocoons and one bursts open, then another until Mason's corpse is crawling with them, then thousands, hundreds of thousands of butterflies fill the barn, a kaleidoscope of color constantly moving and the hum is so loud I have to cover my ears. And then I woke up.*

Hannibal had sat motionless as Will had described his dream, not lifting a finger to either croissant or coffee, eyes riveted to Will's face. Will had felt mildly embarrassed at the scrutiny with which Hannibal had studied him, but had accepted the long fixated gazes from him as another facet of the intense intimacy they shared.

It had never occurred to Will to fabricate dreams for Hannibal, not because he feared Hannibal would discern a lie if he told one, he had already told plenty, but because his curiosity about Hannibal's interpretations had been genuine. His interpretations had not been an exercise in narcissism because Will knew all his dreams were about Hannibal. Are they ever about anything else?

Before I comment, what does the dream suggest to you?

I would say missed opportunity, but that's not entirely true. I left the decision regarding Mason to you.

Killing Mason yourself would have facilitated your becoming, but circumstances denied us that pleasure. Still, the imagery is provocative and beautiful. Your instincts followed you into in your dreams instead.

Hannibal had made no reference to the symbolism of the stag. Will had mentioned the stag before and had left Hannibal to his own interpretation. Will had understood its significance and the reason for its recurrence in his dreams and that…had been enough. Hannibal had seemed to know, instinctively, that the stag was off limits, too much intimacy too quickly for Will. Hannibal had wisely not pushed Will with regard to his dreams, satisfied to nudge and nibble on the small confessions that sprouted from Will's lips in the same way he nudged and nibbled at the morsels of flesh on his plate…or in his bed.

Hannibal had taken another slice of powdered croissant into his mouth, closing his eyes as the tender flaky crust had melted on his tongue. A gulp of coffee had followed and the taste of roasted bean with a touch of sugar had been similarly savored. Observing Hannibal at the table was like watching pleasure personified.

Why do you think you left the decision to me?

Thoughts of Jack and their plan had crashed through his skull and Will had shoved those thoughts away, and like snow in the winter, he'd had to keep shoveling to keep the thoughts away. Something in Will had shifted as he had stood on the platform of Mason's barn, knife at Hannibal's throat. Maybe it was the audacity of Mason to pull up to his home and *invite* him to come out and feed his pigs. Maybe it was the thought that a creature such as Mason would take from Will what he had attempted and been fantasizing about for months. Maybe it was because killing Hannibal on command for someone else had not been intimate enough.

Will is certain part of the reason was simply because he had not especially liked that Mason had expected Will to perform for him. *That* had rankled to no end.

Will thinks now as the cab approaches the city limits of Impruneta that the something that had shifted or snapped inside had been acceptance, although he had not recognized it as such at the time. His hatred for Mason and what he had done to his sister, for what he had planned on doing to Hannibal and to him had struck a chord, had conjured up an entirely different set of scales of justice in his mind. He had looked with Hannibal's eyes upon the malignant mass of drooling flesh in his chair and compassion had fled the room. Their game of fucking with Mason had resulted in a profound change of perspective for Will. A change he had not been fully prepared to process or to accept at the time.

Because the snow had kept falling and Uncle Jack had kept taking his shovel.

Will had provided Hannibal with the most honest answer he could, given the snow…

My empathy. I compulsively assume alternate perspectives.

Your empathy, yes. You still try and anticipate my mind. You are curious if you are correct. More curious about me than indulging your impulses.

"*Perhaps…*"

Will had smiled over his coffee cup, had felt the warmth engendered by the subtle curve of silken lips as fingers brushed aside a lock of blonde hair with just a touch of impatience.

Not comfortable pronouncing judgment? Hannibal had said after a moment's pause.

It's not that simple.

Hannibal's gaze had shifted, fixated on Will's chin as he had flicked his fingers along his own chin and the early morning stubble there. Will had finally wiped at his chin and then had licked the smear of red glaze from his fingers smiling self-consciously the entire time and wondering how long Hannibal had waited to let him know he still had preserves sticking to his scruff.

Isn't it? You can anticipate, imagine what I think or want with surprising accuracy. You will only find enjoyment and the peace that comes with that enjoyment when you allow yourself to fully become intimate with your own instincts.

Instincts are neither good nor evil. If good and evil have nothing to do with God, if they are but concepts why judge?

Because like God, it is our nature.

Is it instinctive to look for good and evil?

We assign good and evil to the world around us. Instinct like emotion is a gift from our animal ancestors. If God created us in his image, our instincts and emotions guide us by His design.

In a perfect world, like the Garden of Eden. But man is a fallen creature and went out into an imperfect world. There have to be constants.

Society is founded on the illusion that there are, but everything changes. We attempt to have constants like constellations, and we chart them, navigate by them, and they are no more fixed than are the stars in the sky, than a pebble lying on the beach.

Stars are more enduring than pebbles.

A pebble rolls with the tide. A star explodes. Which is more enduring?

Values are not pebbles, or stars. Some things should be…eternal.

I have values. But I am always open to negotiation. Always aware that circumstances shape their context, meaning, and application.

Oh…so like the changing wind, everything is situational?

Will had leaned over his plate, opened his arms for emphasis, the wave of his hands fanning powdered sugar from Hannibal's plate onto the front of his burgundy Ralph Lauren robe. Will had slunk back into his chair, already biting at his lip as Hannibal had brushed at the woven fabric with his napkin, and had cleared his throat, again.

Yes. He had said looking up with a bland expression. *Like the wind.*

With all that um…wind don't you feel the need for an…anchor? Something to ground you?

I have you. Hannibal had said with a tilt of his head and the merest crease of a smile had adorned the thin pink lips. *Hardly an anchor, but a beacon of light in an otherwise gray and muddy and… imperfect world.*

Will rouses himself from his reverie as he feels the cab slow to a stop. They have turned off the main road they had been on, Via di Fabbiolle, and turned east and away from the church and the Basilica of *Santa Maria all'Impruneta.* Will had noted its spire against the blue sky passing by his window through slatted eyes as the cab had rolled along.

Will looks out the window at the vista of sun burnt brown rolling hills, wild flowers and groves of trees. They have parked at the curb and Will looks up the length of a long drive that disappears into a series of terraces very much like the ones in Fiesole. A villa sits at the crest of this hill and Will can see a few other villas further up and farther away, likely accessible from hidden drives like this one.

He climbs out of the backseat and leans into the passenger side window. The driver looks up from the steering wheel, waiting.

"This is the correct address?"

"You tell me, eh? You've never been here before?" the driver asks, incredulous perhaps that his passenger had given a private address without seeming to know who lived there.

"Uh, no. I'm not sure I'm in the right place…" Will stops speaking as two Polizia vehicles pull up behind the taxi. "Oops. Guess I am. Would you do me a favor and come back in about half an hour?"

Will reaches into his wallet, pulls out enough for the fare and waves a crisp hundred Euro note and offers it to driver. The driver takes it tentatively.

"Will they still be here?"

"Probably. But I'll have finished with them by then. There's um…more where that came from."

“Si, Signore, I will come back. Maybe you need a little longer than half hour. Is a long walk up that hill.”

“Make it an hour, then?”

The driver looks in his rearview mirror and Will glances over his shoulder to find Pazzi approaching, and quickly.

“See you in an hour.” The driver says, already pulling away.

Will watches the taxi disappear down the road and he rubs his hands along his jaw, perspiration already beading up and barely out of the air conditioned cab. Will knows hiking up that hill is going to be brutal in the jacket but he needs the jacket to conceal the Berretta holstered at his side. He sighs and turns into the approaching footsteps behind him and hopes Pazzi does not try to frisk him. That…would be a very bad idea.

Will frowns into the smug face of Rinaldo Pazzi. Pazzi smiles showing a row of glossy white teeth.

“Buongiorno, Signore Graham. You don’t seem surprised to see me.”

“Surprised would not be the word that springs to mind.”

Pazzi’s smile deepens and his hands slip from his pockets to rest on his hips. Will notes the expensive tailored suit, the polished leather shoes, and the sparkling flare of the diamond stud in his ear. There are, however, no traces of lipstick on his crisp collar today. Will does not miss Pazzi’s cursory assessment of him either.

“Detective D’Angelo told me all about your trip to the Uffizi. I hope you had a good time.”

“We did. But I got a call from Jack and had to cut it short. But you already know about all that.”

“Maybe you’ll visit again, eh?”

“Anything is possible.”

“So, why are we here? What did you find?”

“A name and an address, probably bogus, but I thought I would check it out.”

“What led you to the Uffizi?”

“I know the man…intimately, remember? I know the art that hung in his house, I know his…tastes. He likes museums. I looked up the patrons and employees of the museum. The name Boucher came up.”

“Butcher. Buccieri.”

“He already used Buccieri as a…taunt. It was a long shot, but I’m thinking it more misdirection.”

Pazzi glances up the hill. “He knew you would look for him there. This is the address you found?”

“Yes.” Will says, truthfully though omitting that there had been a notation to use a post office box for mail and the phone number listed had gone directly to voice mail.

Will cranes his neck to look above the manicured terraces. “I’ve never been here. I didn’t really know what to expect. These are…very nice homes.”

“They are. Very expensive. Some old money around here. Well, we should go up. I’ll send a couple men around the back, just in case it’s not misdirection.”

“I’ll um…just walk with you?”

“As you like. We can talk some more. C’mon…let’s see if your boyfriend is home.”

Will does not comment though he figures his bored expression comment enough. He follows Pazzi up the drive surveying the property and its landscaping as they walk in the hot Tuscan sun. It is clear the grounds are well maintained. Attention to detail is apparent in the arrangement of a contrasting color scheme in the clusters of flowers that adorn the terraces. The lower branches of all the trees have been trimmed away and Will can see the meticulous landscaping extends clear to the villa itself, in carefully constructed tiers of plants and perennials tended by the hired help. The appearance is beautiful but artificial. This is a well-kept farm filled with livestock, not a jungle.

Will is certain Hannibal does not reside here by the time they reach the landing. The toys scattered along the front of the villa cinch it. A couple of trendy mountain bikes lay in the yard, front wheels pointing toward the sky, evidence of possessions taken for granted and discarded despite the price tag. Will hears the bark of a dog from inside the villa. A balding man, dressed simply and appropriately for the weather appears from the depths of the house and stands in the shadow of the screen door, joined by a woman with dark hair streaked with grey before Pazzi can ring the bell.

The man steps outside and gives Pazzi the once over. *Cosa posso fare per voi, Signore?*

A couple of teenage boys come running from around the back of the villa, excited screams of *Polizia!* fill the air and then die suddenly as the boys halt nearly tripping over each other by the front patio, soaking wet in their matching bathing suits and holding oversized beach towels over their shoulders. They stare at Will and Pazzi and then, Will presumes their parents. The boys look at each other mouths agape and eyes so wide and confused and frightened that Will presses his lips together and turns away. Will recognizes the guilt of co-conspirators at once as silent messages pass between the slack jawed brothers.

The boys have evidently been naughty and think the Polizia are here about them. Will wonders what they have done to assume the cops climbing all over their property are here for them. He listens to Pazzi explain to the distressed parents that he had received a tip that a witness they are looking for lives in the area and they were given this address. Will rolls his eyes thinking there are quite a few cops lurking about for a witness. He wanders off to the edge of the drive still in earshot of Pazzi and the homeowners.

The current residents apparently purchased the property at a reduced price a year ago. The entire transaction had been performed by real estate companies. They never met the former owner. Have never received any mail other than their own. Pazzi continues to ask questions and Will’s mind retreats from the barrage of voices and images as he looks around the terraced hills of southern Tuscany on the outskirts of Impruneta. These people know nothing. Hannibal stitched them into his design a year ago.

Will thinks the purchase and sale of the lovely villa behind him had been more than Hannibal’s idea of misdirection. As his eyes alight on one hilltop and another, he tries to imagine how God would perceive this little valley of sheep. He brought a pair of hunting binoculars, but he doesn’t dare use them where Pazzi can see him. And he doesn’t need to.

Will takes a longer look at the pale pearl colored stucco villa on the hill above the driveway where he stands. It is an unassuming residence and yet there is something about its unpretentiousness that catches Will’s eye. Every window is clear, unconcealed by blinds or curtains, leaving the house dark inside to an observer, but offering an unobstructed view into the villas beneath.

A stone wall surrounds the property, but it is ancient and crumbling, barely three foot high Will judges from this distance and thinks the rest of the wall in the ground, ruins nearly swallowed up by dirt and time. He imagines a gate at the entrance of the drive, but it is a barrier of deterrence, not intended as security. The property is situated on an incline; it sweeps upward off the hill, like the earth, tilted on its axis.

The grounds are not neglected but there is a sense of wild randomness as though someone scattered seeds curious what would grow. The resulting flora requires a minimum of maintenance, the caretaker content to leave them follow their nature. Daniel did say Hannibal had spoken of his garden. Will is certain he sees rose bushes in the distance. Blood red clusters dot the property, front and back.

The vegetable garden at the back of the villa is an entirely different matter. It is here the caretaker revels in his creations. No randomness surfaces in the neat rows of tomatoes, peppers, and spiraling vines of string beans among an assortment of other seasonal delights. Will can see what appears to be a grape arbor and rows of sunflowers wave in the distance before a row of fig trees. And more roses.

The creator’s garden is both vast and beautiful. Will lowers his head and fixes his gaze down the drive and across the road that spans below. He takes his time making a full three sixty turn around the property, finally taking a walk around the side of the villa to have a look at the pool. He does not look at the pearl colored villa again.

Pazzi walks up beside him and stares into the depths of aquamarine and concrete with Will. Will stoops to scoop a floating mass of grass into his palm and deposit it on the ground. He hears the click of the lighter and smells the smoke from Pazzi’s cigarette before he rises from the sidewalk. He takes a few steps back, aware Pazzi stands too close on purpose and expects Will to back up and give him his space.

“So, what do you think?”

“I think it was a nice drive to Impruneta.”

“The Ambrosino’s moved here from Napoli last year. The place was not quite so nice they say, so they fixed it up. He works in sales and is often away on business. The wife says it’s quiet around here. All the neighbors have been here forever. No other properties for sale in a long time.”

Will thinks the pretty pearl colored villa was never for sale. The owners are no longer there except perhaps in spirit and…in the mailbox. He is sure mail is delivered for the former occupants and regularly collected. Will shoves his hands in his pockets waiting for Pazzi to figure out he is a day late and many dollars short.

“We are almost done here. I thought you might have some questions for the owners, but I guess not.”

“They don’t know anything. This place is a decoy.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I am.” Will says checking his watch.

“We may have to go back to the Uffizi after all.” Pazzi blows smoke, allowing the hot breeze to send it into Will’s face.

“I would recommend discretion if you can manage it, but it probably does not matter at this point. The game was changed as soon as the tableaux went public.”

“You know, he can waste us a lot of time with this misdirection.”

“Yes, he can.” Will says as he begins to walk back toward the front of the house.

“I think maybe the misdirection is only for us. There is no misdirection here for you.”

Pazzi follows on Will’s heels, his designer cologne hangs in the humid air cloyingly annoying like Pazzi himself and Will thinks Hannibal will likely pair Pazzi with a full bodied red wine, from ripe and rotting grapes, perhaps something local since the Pazzi are descended from a famous Florentine family. Or infamous as the case may be. Will thinks something *robusto*, like a tart chianti, lip smacking tart…

“You knew he would not be here.”

“I told you that up front.” Will says as he continues down the drive.

“But…you came anyway.” Pazzi calls after him.

Pazzi stops at the edge of the drive and watches Will descend into clouds of purple asters and bright white and yellow daisies. He waits until Will is out of sight before taking out his phone.

Hannibal turns from the window where he has watched the Polizia and Will from above. He had watched the officers in their easily recognizable jackets fan out along the property line of his neighbors’ pleasing if unexceptional home below, had watched Detective Rinaldo Pazzi question the Ambrosino’s and their troublesome sons and Hannibal had watched with mild amusement as Pazzi had badgered Will as he had sauntered down the drive, shoulders straight and head erect, leaving no doubt in Hannibal’s mind that Will would be back.

His phone rings, and Hannibal thinks perhaps he may have turned it back on too soon. He is relieved to see it is Roberta and not Du Maurier on the caller ID.

“Bonjour, Roberta.” Hannibal says cheerily.

“Hannibal. Do you have a moment?” Roberta says and Hannibal’s relief evaporates.

“Of course. I take it there is a problem with negotiations?”

“I am here in Sassari with Elario Paolini…”

“Elario? That’s a Latin variation on happy.”

“Yes…well, he is anything but. Did your William kill one of the Paolini, Luciano or Lucia?”

“He did. Luciano.” Hannibal says unable to keep the pride out of his voice.

“And carve him into pieces to fit him into a…glass box?” Roberta speaks sternly, but Hannibal knows better.

“With pieces of…pork, yes.” He grins into the phone.

“While I am sure that the finished objet d’art was poetic in its expression, the Signore is not pleased. This complicates negotiations. Considerably.”

“How much?”

“It is not a matter of money at this point. The family’s pride is at the heart of it.”

“Then an appeal to their collective heart is required. Family protects family. Do they understand what family means to Mason?”

“Ah…make them see that the thing that beats in Mason’s chest is not a heart. I think a *peu de coeur à coeur* with Margot might be in order.”

“I think she would be amenable. She was my patient and I regard her fondly. Even better, I think she enjoys a certain rapport with Will.”

“Well then, I’ll leave you to your dinner preparations. And to your *cher* William.”

“*Merci*, Roberta. *Au revoir*.”

Hannibal presses his thumb along the screen of the phone full of apps as Tatiana had called them. Hannibal does not even know what all of them are. He uses the ones Tatiana showed him how to use and disregards the rest. He scrolls through his message box and sees that Du Maurier has phoned. Twice.

She must have taken her meeting with Jack already. And Jack likely has his sample to match against the evidence. Hannibal is curious if Du Maurier will become impatient enough, and annoyed enough to drive out to Impruneta. She can now freely accept Hannibal’s dinner invitation and proffer the invitation as her excuse for dropping in. Du Maurier never drops in. She models the behavior she desires from Hannibal compulsively. Ordinarily, she would not make an appearance unless she had confirmed he would be home. Hannibal thinks she may make an exception today. For once, she may even prefer Hannibal be elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Hannibal needs to know what she is up to lest she ruin more than his dinner plans. Let her come if she be so bold. The swan will dine with his goose regardless.

Hannibal hums along to Mozart as he walks back to the aromatic smells of his cluttered kitchen and breathes deeply, inhaling the mix of Italian herbs and baking bread. He closes his eyes and thinks he has not felt this much *happy* anticipation in far too long. And Hannibal realizes he *is* happy. The aching in his chest has dulled, his heart overcome by the sheer joy thoughts of Will walking through his kitchen and sitting at his table inspires. The wound no longer bleeds, but it remains open.

As he looks about his counters and surveys the courses he has prepared, all in varying degrees of completion, he thinks Will might have to assist in the preparations. The very thought gratifies. Reinforcing positive associations has always been part of Will's therapy. He picks up the remote from the counter and increases the volume so that Mozart's most lovely aria, *Ruhe Sanft* resounds throughout the villa.

The cab had been waiting for Will at the bottom of the hill, the driver's huge smile and friendly wave evidence enough of his relief at seeing Will walk over without a Polizia escort. Will had slid into the back seat, grateful for the blast of air conditioning that had washed over him as soon as he had slammed the door shut.

Will had closed his eyes and instructed the driver to take him back to Impruneta. He had avoided the cab driver's eyes and his dashboard but had listened to his suggestions for lodging and dining this evening with polite indifference. He had tipped his long suffering driver exceptionally well for his punctuality and discretion. Once he had pulled away, Will had walked the few blocks to the parking lot of the Church of Santa Maria dell'Impruneta and had promptly taken a brick to the driver's side window of a twelve year old Ford Taurus and driven it quietly from the lot, back along Via di Fabbiolle, and parked it across the street from one of the villas situated several acres behind the pearl colored villa.

After wiping the steering wheel and door handles down with his jacket, he had slung the damp and rather ripe smelling jacket over his shoulder and had traversed the scorched sun kissed fields, keeping to the trees.

Will smiles slightly as he walks and wonders if it is possible to surprise God in his own garden.

He had not noticed anyone following him on the road, but once he had parked the Taurus in as secluded a spot as he could manage and had begun his ascent into the hillside, the feeling that he had attracted a tail had been persistent. He has been unable to shake off the feeling and he trusts his instincts. His body is alive with instinct.

Whoever it is, he knows how to stalk and do it quietly. Not quietly enough, though. Whoever it is has grown impatient, or fears losing Will. He hears the cracking of twigs behind him as he shifts his course from field to woods. Will is not a seasoned huntsman, he prefers fishing, but he has been out in the deep woods tracking game enough to recognize the difference between animal and human movement. Especially when the human has been raised among brick and concrete. Like Pazzi.

The villa and its vast garden looms between the branches of the trees and Will moves to the tree line, picking his way through the undergrowth until he reaches the field and crosses into the sunlight once again. He walks quickly toward the white washed wall, heart thumping more vigorously than when he was crouched in the alley.

You've set some sort of trap and you're goading Hannibal into it. How can you be sure he's not goading you?

I can't…

Do you know what an imago is, Will?

There are no traps this time except the one he and Hannibal have fallen into. They are building trust between them from the ground up having razed the fragile scaffolding they had barely erected. Each of them carries an imago of the other with them. Neither of them ideal. To err is human, to forgive is divine. It occurs to Will that perhaps Hannibal's concept of forgiveness preserves his imago of Will. For Hannibal, to forgive is to ignore. Will can ignore what Hannibal is. He is not prepared to ignore what he is, what he has become. Daniel is right. Will has yet to forgive himself.

He tries to imagine what that might feel like and cannot. He supposes he will recognize it when it happens. In the meantime, there are some teacups that need shattering, teacups that will not be gathering themselves up again. He does not need to anticipate what Hannibal may or may not do. He already knows. There is but one teacup Will wants to gather up. He thinks Hannibal wants to gather it up, too.

They may, however, have differing opinions on how that should happen.

Will finds himself staring at the ancient wall and wonders fleetingly how long he has been standing here thinking of forgiveness and teacups. He glances around the open field and considers that he has indeed jumped off the fence. What now? He supposes he begins climbing Hannibal's walls… again. Only this time, Hannibal will have to scale a few of Will's walls.

Will climbs over the stone washed wall easily, landing on his feet with a dull thud as the powdery soil gives beneath him. The wall is a little higher here it seems, erosion exposing more of it at the back of the property than at the front. Will's senses are inundated with the scents he inhales as he stands up straight and pulls the jacket back on, if only to free his hands and conceal the weapon he hopes he does not need. He moves slowly, cautiously through the array of hydrangea that line the interior of the wall like a picture frame, the stalks heavy with balls of tiny blue flowers that dip to the ground.

Though the ground is dry, the plants thrive and Will knows they are watered regularly once the sun goes down. He heads toward the sunflowers and pauses every so often to listen for the tell-tale rustling of grass or the crunching of dirt behind him. Not quite sure if he has been followed this far or not, but not hearing anything other than birds, bugs, and the notes of violins still too faint to identify, Will continues deeper into the garden. He passes the fig trees, and the peach and pear, to walk carefully through the bowed sea of sunflowers, planted he thinks for the express purpose of providing a silent alarm for intruders. There is no way of approaching the house from the back without going through the sunflowers. They stretch from one side to the other, several yards deep.

The music becomes more discernable as he draws closer to the villa. The violins give way to piano and Will thinks he recognizes Chopin's *Nocturne No. 2*. He forces himself to walk slowly, careful not to disturb the tall top heavy flowers more than necessary. The quickening in his chest and the nervous tingling in his limbs is maddening. He finds to his dismay that his palms are perspiring and he feels sixteen again. His fingers reach inside his jacket and tug his shirt free of his trousers. He feels along his stomach, his fingers quickly drawn to his wound like a needle to a groove and he traces his fingers along the raised flesh to ground him.

He feels more grounded until a head with long brown locks rises from a row of tomato plants up ahead and turns toward him. Will's hands fall away from beneath his shirt, and he thinks vaguely had he been holding his weapon, it would have slipped from his hand…again. Will stares at the chiseled visage in the sunlight, cheeks ruddy with the sun and graced with stubble like his own. The familiar form rises stiffly, unfolds his long legs from beneath him elegantly like a spider and stands in profile, head bowed though the flexing of fingers at his side belies the calm exterior.

"Hello Will. I've been expecting you."

Hannibal's voice carries across the garden like Chopin's *Nocturne*, soft and melodic. He turns his head slightly to gaze at Will from across the expanse of garden between them. As Will gazes back he notes the softness of the fabric in Hannibal's attire, the pliant and well-worn sandals upon his feet. These are his gardening clothes, a creature of habit, Hannibal wears them only in the garden and he wears them with the same ease as he would one of his suits. He is…charming to the last.

Will hears nothing but the beating of his heart as he gazes into the dark eyes he knows so well. After an eternity it seems, the chirping of birds and the sounds of Chopin return and Will lifts his head in greeting.

"Right on time." Hannibal says.

"Am I?" Will exhales, realizing he has been holding his breath.

"I came outside for some more tomatoes." Hannibal indicates the basket at his feet. "What did you come for?"

His eyes sweep over the slender frame, bedraggled attire and the signature scruff along the exquisite jaw. Sweat drips from limp curls and glistens upon his skin. Will's unique scent floats upon the breeze, hangs in the densely charged air and Hannibal breaths him in deeply to the sounds of Chopin and the hum of cicadas. The moment is perfect.

Will holds his hands out to the sides so Hannibal can see them, silently seeking permission to approach.

"Conversation."

The lift of a brow and the softening of lips are answer enough and Will edges closer. The wind shifts behind him and he turns his head to the side, to better hear the rustling of shriveled sunflower leaves, inviting Hannibal to do the same.

"I um…didn't exactly come empty handed." Will says as the rustling stops then starts again.

"I've already prepared dinner and lamb is not on the menu."

Hannibal continues to look at Will but he can see the haphazard rippling of his sunflowers behind him. Hannibal had hoped they would be dining alone, but since the cub has brought a lamb with him, they will have to make do. Hannibal understands Will also had to make do with circumstances.

"Some dishes are better when served cold." Will says shaking the damp hair that clings to his forehead and face.

"Especially Italian." Hannibal says.

Hannibal steps away from the tomato plants to face Will front on. As he does, Will hears the unmistakable crunch of trampled stalks and the click of a weapon magazine from behind and to his left as does Hannibal, whose head and eyes swivel in the direction of the sound.

"I hope not exactly empty handed also means you are armed." Hannibal says quietly.

His eyes look past Will to the dark haired figure that moves ever closer, taking out a flower with every step. He had expected some destruction as soon as he had noticed the irregular ripple in the sea of yellow and black and he knows he will be leaving the beautiful flowers behind anyway, but the sight of them fallen in front of him needles nonetheless.

Will nods his head and swallows, unfastens his holster. He draws the Berretta on Hannibal and shrugs an apology as he looks over his shoulder to the left.

“That’s three times, Will. Three times you have pointed a gun at me.” Hannibal says as he raises his hands over his shoulders.

“Shhhhh.” Will hisses, shaking his head. “Over here!” Will shouts, eyes on Hannibal.

A sense of the surreal descends like a cloud. And yet, Will feels comfortable in this cloud of chaos. His mind already acclimated to the sight of Hannibal standing with his hands in the air, a flicker of petulance marring the handsome features as he practically pouts over the damage to his lovely garden completely unconcerned about the gun pointed at him. Already acclimated to the idea of staying for dinner…

“Signore Graham? Do you have him?”

Will winces, closes his eyes in frustration and disappointment and the fog of the surreal grows thicker still. He had not anticipated this. The ache in his chest is sharp as Ruggerio’s voice rings out from the sunflowers at Will’s back. Agamemnon sent one of his lieutenants instead of coming to the party himself. Will thinks he will have a tough time restraining himself from tearing Pazzi apart next time he sees him for this.

“I have him. Ruggerio? Where are you?” Will says through gritted teeth.

The plaintive notes of Bach’s *Prelude No. 1* floats upon the air, and Will is struck by the incongruity of the piano prelude playing quietly while he contemplates the most efficient way to disarm Ruggerio so he, or Hannibal, can kill him.

Hannibal watches the Polizia officer stumble from the sunflowers and trample everything in his path on his way to Will. It is clear Will had been expecting someone else by the pained look on his face. Hannibal is curious to see who it is that has Will all twisted up. Time to see if the cub can manage his expectations and reconcile instinct with regret.

Will hears Ruggerio crashing through the last of the tall flowers behind him, abandoning stealth or the approximation of it and he begins to walk backward slowly, Berretta still leveled at Hannibal.

Ruggerio huffs his way forward until he stands flush beside Will, his gun also drawn. He stares at Hannibal standing calmly with hands in the air, wicker basket of tomatoes at his feet. Lecter appears to Ruggerio more like a professor on sabbatical than a psychopathic killer. Images of the murder tableaux flash through Ruggerio’s head and he thinks of this tall muscular man taking a power saw to the corpses and shudders inwardly.

Will imagines Ruggerio’s heart hammering away as his fingers clench the grip of his weapon. Whatever Ruggerio expected to find; this is not it. Hannibal continues to gaze blandly at both of them, patient as always but Will knows he is already calculating variables and anticipating consequences. Thankfully, Hannibal offers no pithy pronouncements in response to Ruggerio’s ogling or the demolition job on his garden.

“You found him.” Ruggerio pants at last, “Pazzi said you would. I had orders to uh…follow you. Did you know I was tracking you?”

Will nods slowly, gives Ruggerio a sidelong glance. Ruggerio’s hair sticks to his head, sweat trickles from temples and ears down his neck, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he tries to moisten a dry throat. He is anything but calm.

“Don’t be sorry for doing your job. Pazzi sent you…” Will looks to Hannibal, and Hannibal nods almost imperceptibly in answer. “Did you call it in yet?”

“No, but I uh…called from the car, when I found you in…Impruneta.”

Ruggerio swallows hard. He looks closely at the serial killer in front of him. He looks nothing like what Ruggerio had imagined. The features are the same as the photo but this man standing in the dirt in simple button down Polo, long Bermuda style shorts that fall to his knees and battered Timberland sandals tending his…garden does not fit. Lecter is a brutal killer, though this man looks sturdy and strong, his demeanor seems mild.

Graham does have his weapon aimed at him, but Ruggerio can see no tension in the musculature, no tension at all emanates from him. The tension is all coiled up in Graham beside him. Ruggerio catches his breath as Lecter turns his attention to him, as though tearing his gaze from Graham is a wrenching experience. It is within the steady gaze of the dark eyes that sweep over him in mild curiosity that Ruggerio finally sees the killer.

The dark eyes flicker with amused interest as they engage his and Ruggerio thinks of a cat playing with a mouse. The image is most unwelcome considering Ruggerio is feeling like the mouse.

There is no doubt in Ruggerio’s mind that if Graham did not have his gun trained on this man; Ruggerio would be fighting for his life. Pazzi had told him to be careful with Graham. Not to trust him, especially if he actually got close to Lecter. Ruggerio mentally kicks himself for not calling Pazzi when he had the chance. He should have phoned before taking off after Graham on foot. Pazzi’s instincts about Graham knowing where to find Lecter had been solid. Ruggerio hopes his instincts about the rest of Graham are wrong. Alia likes him, seems to trust him, and Alia does not give her trust easily.

But this Graham… Ruggerio glances at the ex-profiler or whatever he is as he holds his weapon, face in profile and body posed in a classic Isosceles stance. He is a study in concentration. He is also *molto bello*, and Detective D’Angelo is not immune to *bello*. Ruggerio begins to wonder what Graham and his killer were talking about. He had heard their voices, but both of them speak softly and he could not hear their English distinctly. He thinks they were talking about…food.

Ruggerio shifts his feet uncomfortably, becoming unsure of himself and likely sensing something not quite right in the air. Will can feel the air crackling with vibration. Can almost taste blood upon his tongue the air is so thick with the sweet metallic scent of it.

“Not since Impruneta? Don’t you think you should call him now?” Will says, tongue flickering over moist lips.

Hannibal almost smiles. So clever…his Will.

“Right.” Ruggerio says.

Ruggerio keeps his service Berretta trained on Hannibal as he fishes in the liner of his jacket for his phone with the other hand. As his fingers clasp the phone and begin to draw it out Ruggerio wonders if Graham has contacted his boss, Crawford.

“Did you call…”

Ruggerio blanches in horror as Will turns from Hannibal and aims his own sleek black Berretta at Ruggerio’s head. Ruggerio’s face crumples like crepe paper as he stares into the barrel and drops his hand from his liner pocket.

“Did I call Jack? Um…no. Put the gun down. On the ground.”

Ruggerio cannot think. Time stops. He sees nothing but the barrel end of the Berretta until his eyes travel up Graham’s arm then shoulder to focus on the intense blue eyes fixed with grim resolve Ruggerio does not question. He cannot believe Graham has turned his weapon on him.

“What the…”

Ruggerio’s words fail him as his mind reaches deep to pull up his training that seems to have evaporated as he stares blankly at Graham.

“I know it doesn’t *feel* like it… but if it’s um…any *comfort*….” Will pauses, the words catch in his throat thick as paste chafing like sandpaper, “…this isn’t about you.”

Ruggerio curls back trembling lips exposing white teeth tightly clenched and his outstretched arm quivers as though the weapon he wields has suddenly become too heavy for his hand. He just can’t seem to make himself swing his arm around to point his gun at Graham. Something primal has hold of him and he simply cannot move.

Will shakes his head at Ruggerio, both hands on the grip of his *Cheetah*. Ruggerio’s eyes move to the tomato plants, but Will knows Hannibal is no longer there.

“Where is he?” Ruggerio whispers, his forehead creased and beaded with sweat, his mind only now grasps the enormity of what has happened.

“Right beside you. You can lower your weapon if you please…Detective.” Hannibal says.

He had moved as soon as Will had shifted the gun from him to Ruggerio. Easy enough to walk right up to him while his mind was otherwise engaged by the sight of Will’s Berretta in his face.

Hannibal‘s fingers close over the grip of Ruggerio’s service Berretta and gently draws it from his trembling fingers. Ruggerio stares helplessly as Hannibal deftly relocks the safety and releases the magazine. For all his training, Hannibal thinks poor Ruggerio is about to soil himself. He glances down and is impressed Ruggerio’s trousers are still dry. Hannibal thinks for not much longer.

“Oh…*Mio Dio*” Ruggerio cries out suddenly, the words ripping from his throat. “I…you…oh…*che cazzo hai intenzione di fare*?”

Will takes a long breath and draws it out slowly, lips pursed in thought. He has to ask Ruggerio a couple of things. Will realizes with dismay he doesn’t even know Ruggerio’s given name. He keeps the weapon level with Ruggerio’s head just in case his instinct to fight or flee kicks in, but Will doubts he will have to shoot.

Hannibal looks into Will’s face and sees the regret; the pale blue eyes are moist with it, but Hannibal also sees anger and determination shimmering in those pools of blue. He is positively radiant as he stands with his precious weapon trained on Ruggerio’s face.

Ruggerio cannot think clearly. Pazzi had warned him. But Graham had not wasted any time stealing a car. He had figured he could call that in later. No reason to risk Graham getting stopped by the locals. Following Graham had not been difficult until he started driving the back roads. He had driven the Taurus very fast and Ruggerio had almost lost him twice. The second time he had been lucky because Graham had already parked the old Ford far off road and up a hill in a shaded grove of trees. Ruggerio had driven right past it and had had to double back.

By the time he had spotted Graham, he was hugging the tree line of another hill and moving quickly up and away from the road below. Ruggerio had thought it better not to waste time or draw attention to himself by walking and talking at the same time and he had also kept to the woods. He doubts anyone saw him. No one.

Treat Graham as a suspect. Do not engage him…or Lecter. You got that?

Sono così scopata… Ruggerio thinks if he can appeal to Graham’s reason there is hope. He cannot possibly be thinking of shooting a police officer. He hopes this is a ruse to confuse Lecter. Ruggerio is feeling very confused.

“What are you…going to do?” Ruggerio whines softly, shoving thoughts of the murder tableaux away so he can think.

“Does Pazzi know I stole the car?” Will asks calmly.

“You stole a car?” Hannibal says.

“It was necessary.” Will says lifting his eyes to Hannibal’s.

“Where is it?”

“Does it really matter right now?”

Will speaks from jaws clenched in irritation. He lifts his chin, thinking it supremely surreal he is arguing with Hannibal…already.

“If you don’t mind…” Will says with a toss of his head.

Hannibal returns the dull stare but remains quiet. This is turning out to be a more productive afternoon than he had imagined. And quite entertaining. He has missed this so much…

Ruggerio blinks his eyes repeatedly, unable to grapple with the implications of the banter between Graham and Lecter. They seem…almost…friendly. His stomach roils with acid. *Oh no….no…*

“Did you tell him I stole the car?” Will repeats, certain that Ruggerio is losing it.

“I…no. I haven’t called since leaving Impruneta.” Ruggerio says looking from Will to Hannibal and back again. *Questo non sta accadendo….this is not happening….*

“Do you believe him?” Hannibal asks Will.

Will shrugs in answer. Will is inclined to believe Ruggerio. It is his nature to be honest and an honest response would surface under duress before a lie. It takes time for the brain to lie and Ruggerio's answer had been spontaneous. Will knows he doesn't have long to ask his questions. Ruggerio is in shock for the moment, but he will do something stupid and desperate very soon.

"How long before Pazzi expects you to check in?"

"No time…unless there's a problem. *Ai! Mio Dio…"*

Ruggerio stumbles forward and begins to breathe quickly, erratically. Hannibal steadies him by the shoulders, feels the flinching of muscle and watches the wild widening of his eyes as Ruggerio's reptile brain signals to him that he is…prey.

Ruggerio is suddenly consumed with thoughts of becoming art, or worse…food.

"We should not detain Detective Ruggerio much longer." Hannibal says as he moves to take the heaving Ruggerio into his chest, one arm around his throat while the other clamps down to seal the hold.

Ruggerio's thoughts are on fire. He thinks of his family, his brother, and oddly of Clayton. He wonders if Clayton knows what manner of man resides beneath his roof. Is Clayton sheltering Graham? Does he…know? As Graham's psychiatrist Clayton must have some idea… Ruggerio's mind explodes with even more horrifying implications…snap, crackle, and…pop.

"This is not who you expected."

Will shakes his head. "Supposed to be Agamemnon."

"He sent his Lieutenant. Shrewd."

"Cowardly." Will says, still shaking his head.

"Contemptible."

"Very."

"And yet, circumstance provides opportunity to examine good and evil. Are we contemplating good or evil?"

"There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so." Will says.

"Ah, Hamlet saw his world a prison. What do you see?"

"I see…a garden. And…" Will stares into Ruggerio's face, looks deep into the large brown eyes at once suppliant and disbelieving. "…I think I see both good and evil in this garden. What do you think?"

"I think I see progress. But, this is not what you wanted."

Will shakes his head again, his heart knotting in his chest as he feels the feathers sprout along his back. He feels the cool shadow of the giant wings and looks up to find the red rimmed eyed eagle of his dreams soaring overhead, scaly serpentine tail scoring across the sky.

Hannibal watches Will's face as he grapples with his emotions. Ruggerio is not Randall or Mason. This is new. The taking of this life is not an act of self-defense or righteous vengeance. Hannibal thinks Will most beautiful when those pale blue eyes glisten as they do now, the struggle within consuming him from the inside out.

As Will continues to gaze up, Hannibal thinks he might be hallucinating at this moment. Will eyes seem to be tracking something in the sky, more shadows that only he can see and it occurs to Hannibal that Will's dreams are now part of his conscious reality.

Dreams prepare us for waking life.

Will's nightmares have followed him out of his dreams and that beautiful mind of his has found a way to exist in both. He has prepared for his waking life, for his awakening, the only way he knows how. He brought his dreams with him. Endlessly fascinating…his Will.

Hannibal is certain Will knows what has to happen. He is a predator. He will protect what is his. And the cost wounds him. It always will. And this, this heart of his that bleeds for so many also bleeds for Hannibal, and Hannibal would have it back.

His own heart swells within his chest as he watches the turmoil churn like a storm in those blue eyes. His heart blooms as Will's heart wilts. Opposites that complement each other perfectly.

Ruggerio has been listening to the discussion between Graham and Lecter and is convinced they are both insane. He cannot believe this degree of complicity of Graham. Lecter is a…gentleman psychotic killer and Graham is…his lover. They had a fight in Baltimore. Now they are making up in Florence. An Italian vacation… A romantic holiday. No need to go out to dinner…Ruggerio will provide.

Ruggerio's bowels loosen and he stands pissing himself in the Lecter's garden of good and evil…

"Agamemnon will have his seat at the table soon enough." Hannibal says, his nose twitches slightly as he looks down upon Ruggerio nestled against his chest. He thinks his sandals have become damp, and not from the grass.

"What do we think about Detective Ruggerio? Murder or mercy, Will."

Ruggerio's head snaps up at the mention of his name. His body twitches uncontrollably as he tenses against Hannibal's very sturdy frame. Will angles his head as he looks into Ruggerio's doleful brown eyes and knows what has to be done.

"Mercy won't work." Will says. "I'm sorry Pazzi sent you, Ruggerio. I truly am."

"No…no, no, no…" Ruggerio mumbles and begins to wretch away from Hannibal's grip.

Acceptance has bloomed in Will, tentative as it is. Hannibal believes Will would shoot Ruggerio if asked despite his attachment to him. Patience. That Adam brought the lamb to the garden is enough. God accepts sacrifices all the time. And there is no need to make Will pull that trigger or to send the echo of its discharge throughout the valley.

There is also the possibility that Will might toss his weapon aside, just as aware of the resounding consequences of firing it and allow Ruggerio a fighting chance instead. Hannibal cannot permit either. His garden has suffered enough damage for one afternoon. And a fight would draw attention.

As though reading Hannibal's thoughts, Will turns to him, pleading with eyes so blue and wet they are almost translucent. Hannibal wonders how he has existed a year without looking into those eyes.

"Shall I?" Hannibal says, tightening his grip along Ruggerio's shoulders.

"Yes…and quickly?" Will says. Hannibal does not miss the gratitude that alights in those pale blue eyes.

Ruggerio jerks from his daze and begins to struggle against the powerful arms that hold him. "Ah…*prego Dio no, no, no…."*

Hannibal wants to reach over the ripe Ruggerio to caress the tear stained cheek, to touch what is his, but refrains.

"Detective Ruggerio, look at me." He says instead.

Ruggerio pauses to glance around at Hannibal and that second is all Hannibal requires to take Ruggerio's shaggy damp head in his powerful hands and twist it so that death is simultaneous with the snap of cervical vertebrae. Ruggerio slumps in Hannibal's arms and Hannibal lets him down slowly, almost reverently to the ground. Hannibal checks his carotid just to make sure there is no pulse. He stares into Ruggerio's face; mouth still opened in shock and soft brown eyes rolling heavenward, pupils already pins.

"You liked him." Hannibal says.

"I…respected him. I barely knew him."

Will stoops down to settle on his knees beside Ruggerio. He fleeces his pockets until he finds his wallet and opens it. Most people do not carry actual photos in their wallets anymore except maybe Will. He thinks of the singular photo of his dogs in his own wallet and smiles bitterly at the worn photo of Ruggerio standing alongside what must be his brother, Alonso, the one who plays soccer with Daniel. They look alike though Ruggerio is taller, stockier, and he must be the older of the two as his arm rests protectively, lovingly over his brother's shoulder.

Will glances at his driver's license and Polizia badge. "Angelo." Will says softly. He closes his eyes a moment. Of course it is. Angelo…angel…god's messenger…

Hannibal allows Will a moment, knowing his mind is tripping over associations as he reads the scant information in Ruggerio's wallet while stealing glances at the photo. He lifts his head to the wind, sniffing the air while surveying the villas below. It's much too hot to remain outside for long unless one has a pool. His gaze shifts to the Ambrosino's villa below. The boys are in the kidney shaped pool, the parents likely on the veranda having a drink and watching their sons from beneath the roof and the canopy of trees that obscures the deck. All seems quiet. He turns his attentions back to Will and the body lying in the grass beside him.

"Will…"

"How does it feel?" Will asks, head bowed over Ruggerio.

"How does what feel?"

“Well…have I desecrated your new home, or have I sanctified it?”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow ever so slightly. So infuriating…his Will.

“I detect the unbecoming taint of sanctimony. We’ll have to bring him inside. You were planning on staying for dinner?”

Will looks up thinking he hardly has a choice. To decline would be especially rude after littering Hannibal’s garden with the wrong corpse. Ruggerio’s death had been a necessary casualty and his unexpected appearance has provided Will with insight into Hannibal’s state of mind. Whatever his reasons for doing so, he had spared Will from killing Ruggerio without Will having to do much more than get misty eyed. Will’s regret is genuine, but he had amplified it curious to see what Hannibal would do.

He wonders if he should feel guilty about that and thinks the answer is no.

Achilles wishes to dine with Patroclus and Patroclus is disinclined to disappoint him. Will knows beneath the joviality and the unmistakable pride and gratification Hannibal exudes from every pore lies a wounded heart, and though he has offered it once more, he is smoke…he is the devil.

Better the devil you know…

“Shouldn’t we beware of Greeks bearing gifts?” Will says.

He pushes off the ground to stand over Ruggerio and looks to Hannibal. Hannibal stands on the other side of the body in the process of removing what appear to be wet sandals from smooth feet and plucking blades of grass from between finely manicured toes. He glances up at Will and then at Ruggerio as he considers Will’s question, finally standing up straight, sandals dangling from his fingers.

Will is very much in the moment, not retreating, though Hannibal suspects he may yet become overwhelmed at some point. For now, he seems to be thinking quite clearly and he has introduced a most disturbing possibility.

“You think…”

“I’ll check him for tracking devices. Impossible to be too careful. We don’t want dinner disrupted.”

“No…we don’t.” Hannibal says. “How much time do we have if he does?”

“Not enough time to eat dinner…”

Hannibal waits while Will quickly frisks Ruggerio’s clothes. He finds loose change, a dry cleaning ticket, and plenty of lint, but no devices of any kind save his phone are concealed in pockets or clipped to lapels.

“Nothing here.” Will says.

“I think the Greeks reserve the honor of playing the Trojan horse for you. Antenor still intends to spring his trap, with help from our…shrewd…but cowardly Agamemnon. Menelaus certainly hopes so.”

Will stands up and stuffs Ruggerio's few belongings into his jacket pocket. Hannibal is correct, of course.

"Most definitely when they don't hear from Ruggerio. I already covered my tracks in Impruneta. It will appear I never knew Ruggerio was following me."

"When did you know?"

"I didn't know for sure until I hit the woods, but I had anticipated a tail."

"He caught up pretty quickly. Well, I'll take this arm…"

Hannibal pulls Ruggerio up from the left and Will assists on the right, each of them hauling a limp heavy arm over their shoulders so they can drag Ruggerio's corpse into Hannibal's villa. Ruggerio would appear as one passed out from intoxication from a distance, until one noticed the impossible angle of the head.

Will's mind invariably begins to catalog everything within eyesight as they cross the yard, then veranda to finally reach the kitchen. Impressions and associations flood his mind as he leaves the rustling of feathers outside. To Will, walking in this kitchen feels no different that walking into his dreams.

Hannibal understands how Will's mind works, alarmingly well. Will knows he had wanted to meet with Will in his home for several reasons, foremost of course, to have the advantage. But the invitation and the preparations are also overtures that Will recognizes for the olive branches that they are. Hannibal is aware of the associations his villa will inspire in Will. He wants Will to see him…to know him, again. All of this…is merely seduction with a sacrifice to kick it off.

"Wait here." Hannibal says, relieving himself of Ruggerio for the moment to move the center island from the area of floor where the other entrance to the basement is concealed.

Will looks around while Ruggerio hangs from his shoulder. The kitchen is spacious, though no larger than the one in Baltimore. It seems larger perhaps because it is brighter, the décor lighter and very Mediterranean in ambiance. Hannibal has embraced his life here. Will can see that this villa has become a sanctuary for Hannibal, the attention to detail and customization required to accommodate his hobbies notwithstanding. But he is alone here. Emptiness echoes from every wall, loneliness cries out from the spotless and polished surfaces of cabinets and furniture he can see through the wide open arches. And so, he has surrounded himself with a sense of the familiar, a reminder of the home he left behind in the arrangement of couches, bookcases, and tables like wisps of ghosts, shades of his other life.

Will thinks he could navigate through the house in the dark with ease and Hannibal most certainly can.

Like his home in Baltimore, art prints adorn the walls, though different pieces. Hannibal did not seek to replicate his home at Chandal Square, but the familiar tastes abound everywhere. The home is beautiful of course and Will wonders how much of it Hannibal found this way and how much he has embellished. He is curious how Hannibal managed to acquire the place. Another question he can add to the inquiry over dinner.

The aromas within the kitchen tantalize and Will's stomach rumbles despite being able to guess many of the ingredients. Trays of food sit wrapped on the marble counter and while most of the meal seems to be complete, it is obvious Hannibal is still in the midst of his preparations. Cutting board, jars of seasonings, and plenty of…knives are strewn across the center island. He turns from thoughts of becoming reacquainted with Hannibal's cuisine to the immediate challenge of getting Ruggerio downstairs and out of sight. So they can eat. Somebody else. Lucia most likely.

"I guess we have a Sardinian menu this evening?" Will asks as Hannibal's head appears from the opened space in the floor.

"What else? Bring him over. There's another pantry down here. And Will…"

"Hmmm?"

"There is no greater sorrow than thinking back upon a happy time in misery and this…your teacher knows."

Chapter End Notes

Will is quoting from Shakespeare's Hamlet Act II Scene 2. (Hamlet is lamenting to Guildenstern his frustration over his bad dreams.)
Hannibal is quoting from Dante's Inferno Canto V (Dante is speaking to Francesca about the root of her love for Paolo.)

Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

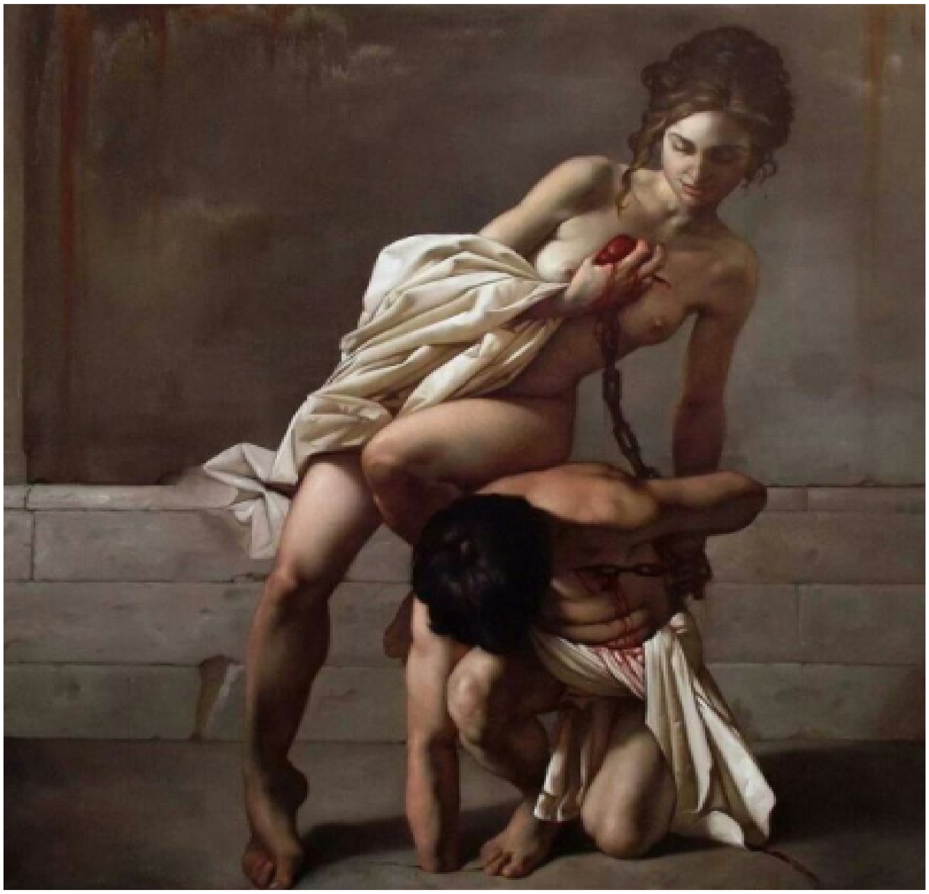
> Will and Hannibal are reacquainted over a Sardinian dinner. The evening delivers a few revelations, a few surprises, and opportunity…
>
> Hannibal's eyes settle once more upon the tangled mane and the pale blue eyes, finally fixing on the finely shaped mouth. Of all the weapons in Will's arsenal, his mouth is most dangerous perhaps even more than the affecting pools of blue. Those supple lips can wrap around a phrase and twist it just so; triggering a range of responses in Hannibal quite unlike anyone else. Were it only phrases those petal soft lips had wrapped around, Hannibal might still be in Baltimore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 70

Will and Hannibal are reacquainted over a Sardinian dinner. The evening delivers a few revelations, a few surprises, and opportunity…



Adam and Eve, Roberto Ferri

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me man?

Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?

John Milton, *Paradise Lost, Book X*

Will stands in Hannibal's stucco and tiled kitchen feeling as though he has just fallen into the antique sausage grinder he left moments ago downstairs. If not minced into pieces and stuffed into a casing of Hannibal's design, then he is adrift on a sea between two shores as he listens to two melodies playing simultaneously; one *fortissimo* and one…*pianissimo*. As he gathers his thoughts and prepares to put on his armor once again he begins to explore this new field of battle.

Hannibal is still down below in his subterranean pantry cum morgue performing his version of a post-mortem upon Ruggerio. Will knows it was only in the interest of expediency due to dinner plans that Hannibal had invited Will to make himself at home upstairs with a nod of his head at the ceiling while holding up two fingers. Will had needed to withdraw from the tangible consequences of his actions laid out on the table and Hannibal, ever sensitive to Will's moods had noticed the subtle shifting of vibrations between them.

Hannibal wants him to recover so he does not retreat. Hannibal wants Will here…not someplace he cannot reach.

Will bites his lip and exhales. It is always about Hannibal, isn't it?

Will leaves the kitchen and wanders into the adjacent study. He finds a cut crystal decanter likely Waterford on the lustrous serpentine curved console, filled with liquid mahogany shimmering like copper in the sun. There are two sparkling tumblers to match and he promptly helps himself to a glass of the single malt whiskey, associations exploding as the exquisitely crafted liquor strokes his throat as though drawn by honey soaked brush.

Ruggerio is a necessary sacrifice. When he had killed the orderly and guard in his hallucination, the decision to kill had been easily made without much time for deliberation. Leaving Chilton to Hannibal had also been easily decided, no anticipating regret there. The regret today has been manageable. The creature from his inferno had been ever present in his hallucination and it is present today. Its presence lingers at his back like a second shadow.

His mind has not ceased to process the implications of his actions. Standing over the still body laid out on cold metal downstairs, Will had stared into the upturned eyes of Ruggerio imagining the thoughts and regrets running around his head his last moments. Angelo Ruggerio was a decent man doing his job. Angelo Ruggerio was not Randall Tier or Luciano Paolini and Will had not wanted to take him apart with scalpel and saw.

Will's jaws tighten as he thinks how much longer his list of kills is likely to become. How many more names he will remember. Rodin's *Gates of Hell* materializes before him, and like the vision that had flashed through his mind at the slaughter house, he sees among the twisting writhing bodies the faces of all those who have wandered within his orbit, the dead and the still breathing.

He shudders despite the warmth he swallows down his throat. Significant that neither Hannibal's face nor his own appears among its tortured souls.

The possibility exists that the Polizia may yet show up at any minute and the thought hovers like the proverbial cloud though with every moment that passes in relative tranquility, the arrival of Pazzi and the Polizia becomes less likely. He is in Hannibal's universe now, and the Polizia are not on their way because they do not exist here.

Will takes another gulp from his glass and thinks he would rather surrender to a bullet than incarceration. If only Pazzi had come instead of Ruggerio. If only… Pazzi should have been the one following him because Pazzi would have called for back-up.

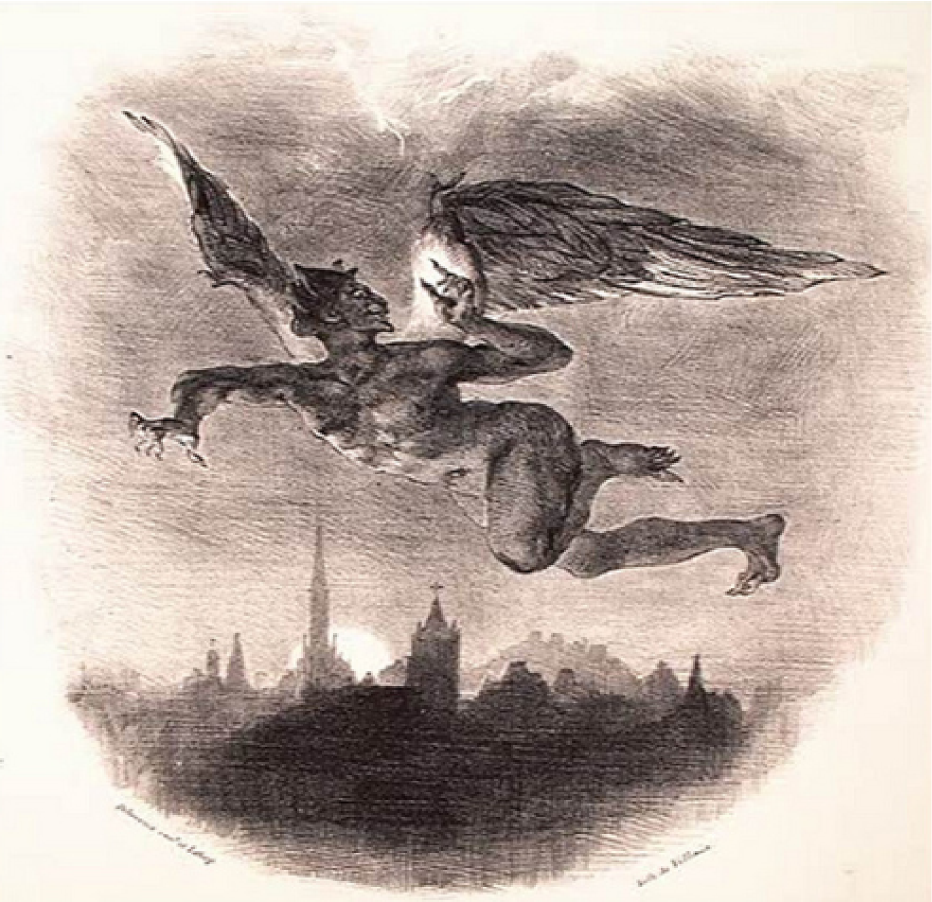
And Will would not be sipping single malt scotch aged so perfectly it sits like sweet ripened raisins on his tongue while the body of Angelo Ruggerio lies damp and cold upon a metal table downstairs, freshly rinsed and awaiting its design.

He who strives on and lives to strive can earn redemption still…

Ironic if it would be Pazzi to show up and be the one who shoots him; poetic justice if it would be Jack; and wishful thinking that it will happen at all. Will is not that lucky.

Linger a while. Thou art so fair.

Will could shout Faust's invitation to Death all day but Death would not come. Unlike Faust his transformation has been neither reformative nor redemptive. Will can only choose the nature of his inferno. He does not want to kill Hannibal, but he does want to die with him. Will's parting gift to humanity.



He considers the ornately framed print of Delacroix's lithograph as thoughts of Lucia and Luciano's final days flip through his imagination in rapid succession like the frozen frames seen through an old view master. Click – next – click – next…and the daily patterns of their prison emerge.

His mind had collected the images downstairs like snap shots and he rearranges them now so he can walk his imagination back into the recent past. Visions of Luciano jogging on the treadmill and lifting the weights bloom in Will's imagination. Hannibal had used the equipment to introduce hope of deliverance from the impossible situation in which Luciano had found himself. Knowing he was being used in a grander scheme, but wanting to believe that the psychopath holding him and his sister captive had offered an improbable but attainable way out; he had cooperated. Beneath the hope had been enough doubt to undermine his resolve at Daniel's house that night. Although physically larger and stronger than Will, he had been too emotionally compromised to fight effectively.

Unable to manage expectations. Learned limitations already ingrained; his power never realized.

The mattresses shoved to a corner covered in a sheet of plastic, the metal table covered with surgical implements also swathed in plastic, the drain in the floor and the hose coiled against the wall create for Will the conditions of the guest room as Hannibal had referred to the twins' chamber of horror. Another euphemism Will can add to another list, a list Will thinks long enough he could alphabetize if he thought about it.

The twins had been held captive here in moderate comfort. Hannibal would have systematically reinforced their worst fears….separation and mutilation…to extract the cooperation he wanted. Drugs, intimidation, and a ruthless application of behaviorism had all combined to create a Purgatory for Lucia and Luciano. While Will had been taking Luciano apart in Daniel's basement, Hannibal had been dissembling Lucia here.

Separated only by geography they had worked in tandem. Hannibal had carved up Lucia to some musical selection, perhaps an Italian opera, while thinking about Will doing the same with Luciano. And Will *had* been doing the same thing. They are no longer really alone without each other but so far into each other's heads that they think of one another at the same time. Like Will, Hannibal cannot trace a finger over his stomach without thinking of Baltimore, not without thinking of the other stomach that bears the mark of his punishment any more than Will can ignore the scar. Hannibal's design.

I got so close to him. Sometimes… I felt like we were doing the same things at different times of day… like I was eating… or showering or sleeping at the same time he was.

Even after he was dead?

Even after he was dead.

Like… you were becoming him.

I know who I am.

Admitting his empathic connection to Hobbs had likely sent Hannibal's mind reeling with endless possibilities. Will knows the seeds of seduction had been sown with the uttering of that singular confession. The rest…evolved and the nature of Hannibal's design was transformed by his emotional attachments. Emotional attachments he had been unprepared for. Emotional attachments Will feels throbbing in his own chest as his eyes wander about Hannibal's villa.

In order to assimilate the associations of Hannibal's villa unfettered, he had taken the visual narrative of the twins' experience downstairs that had erupted in his mind and secured it away, folded it up like used tissue paper and thrown it aside. The Paolini have made their bed with Mason. The forts Will builds for them are not constructed with compassion. Not that Mason has ever garnered anything but contempt.

I'm filled with sympathy for you Mr. Graham. As another of Dr. Lecter's former patients and a victim of his particular psychiatric expertise, I can excuse your…actions. Papa could recognize weakness in a man, and so can I.

I don't believe you remember my actions. Not…accurately.

Dr. Lecter put us in a maze, like the one I built for my pigs. He excited and antagonized us.

Are you a pig, Mr. Verger?

There's more than a spark of intelligence in us. We were manipulated.

Manipulation is most effective when both manipulator and the manipulated have something in common.

We all had something in common. Lecter was treating my sister. You were banging her.

And you were abusing her. He set us on each other. He appealed to your…sense of legacy.

And what sense of yours did he appeal to? You certainly appeal to him…

He offered you a monkey's paw. And you took it.

No monkey's paw for the pretty sperm donor. The devil offered you his heart. And you stomped all over it. I'm offering you the opportunity to stomp on it some more…

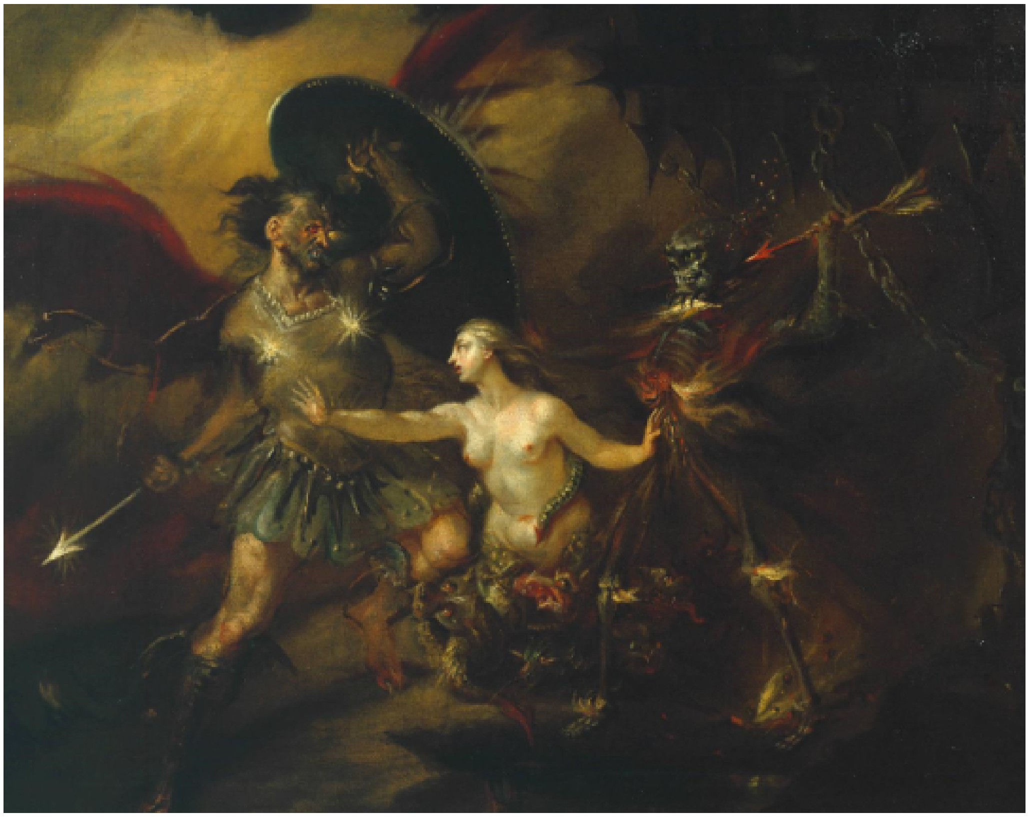
What Mason remembers of his ordeal Will can only guess. Mason has remembered bits and pieces, painted with the broad strokes of emotion, not the finely drawn lines of reason. He had watched what had been happening to him in a haze of hallucinogens and his associations and memories had been filtered through a lens already coated with a crust contaminated by cruel paternal conditioning.

Whatever happens to Mason and the Paolini will not be mourned by Will.

Will carries his tumbler with him into the living room passing through one of the wide arches that open up throughout the villa, affording a view of each room while separating them at the same time. There are no doors inside the villa save the one that leads below. There are no barriers with which to contain the herds here, no grand hall with vaulted ceiling to entertain. The predator walks the floors of his sanctuary alone but instinctively hides his kill and drags it below. No one visits Hannibal here.

Except Du Maurier.

Will sips at his drink and stoops down to check the underside of the carpet. He examines the knotting and stitching along the binding whistling softly as he inhales. The gorgeous Isfahan carpet is hand tied and the fibers are silk. He carefully slips off his loafers with his big toe thinking the rug costs as much as the Jaguar that sits out front. The rug is smooth and soft beneath his feet and Will digs his toes into the plush strands as he gazes at the walls and wonders, not for the first time, how Hannibal is able to indulge his tastes.



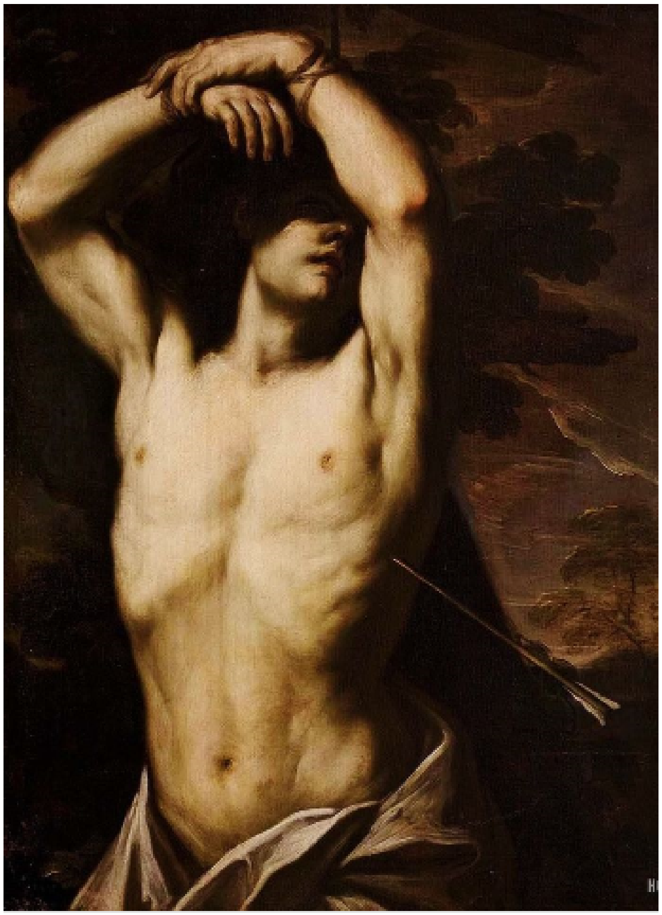
He finds a new print of Hogarth's *Satan, Sin, and Death* appropriately mounted over the fireplace mantle. He imagines the nightmarish figures of Milton's *Paradise Lost* dancing dark and hideous across the canvas illuminated by the light of the flames below. This same print had been mounted in a different frame and had hung in the salon in Baltimore surrounded by the prints evoking the zones of traitors in Dante's ninth circle of hell. The prints of Antenor, Cain and Abel, the Maccabees, and Judas Iscariot are absent here and Will considers that Hannibal has no need to display the warning evoked by those particular prints here in Florence. If Will ever made it here; he was already in his inferno and Hannibal with him. Hannibal has displayed the way out should Will decide to take it. At least, according to Milton's lost archangel.

The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven…

An antique desk similar to the elegant desk that had sat in the center of his office in Baltimore draws Will's attention from the fireplace. Situated directly in front of huge doors that open out to a stone patio that overlooks the side of the villa, the placement of the desk offers a stunning view. Hannibal's art supplies are displayed across the marble surface, the compulsive placement of pencils and scalpel recognizable and endearing. Will wastes no time crossing the room to rifle through the sheets of paper and drawing pads.

Clearly left out to tantalize, but revealing nonetheless, Will's jaw drops as he gazes upon his own likeness in a multitude of different settings and in varying stages of undress. Hannibal's drawings exhibit his usual technical precision. As Will sorts through the stack of drawings he realizes the figures bearing his likeness become increasingly more erotic. Always considerate of Will's discomfort, Hannibal has purposely placed the drawings of nudes without drapery near the bottom of the pile to be viewed last, allowing Will to adjust to the increasing intimacy.

Several versions of Hannibal's *Achilles mourning the death of Patroclus* lay on top, as well as of other sketches of the Homeric pair, both very much alive. Will sorts through the charcoal sketches, setting each one aside with care, his fingers lingering at the crisp edges of the paper.



Beneath the *Iliad* inspired drawings are several sketches of Saint Sebastian all bearing Will's face. Each drawing is rendered with the detail of a photograph but for the grain of the graphite. Will flushes warm as sheet after sheet of sensuously draped nudes slip to the floor from the pile, shoved aside in his haste to inspect the drawings underneath. Will is profoundly struck by the sheer volume of drawings, evident in the portfolios leaning against the terra cotta colored walls and the stack of drawing pads piled neatly beside them. It would take hours to go through them all. The attention to detail in Hannibal's reproductions of the drawings he left behind for the FBI to ogle over and analyze is especially impressive since he had redrawn all of them from memory. He had even drawn his home at Chandal Square and the church next door. Whether images of his former residence or reproductions of the art left behind, Will feels the longing etched into every line as he holds the thick textured paper in his hands.

As he leans down to collect the fallen drawings, Will notices the nearly translucent layer of gray tissue paper lying on top of another drawing that must be unfinished. He removes the tissue paper and is nearly unnerved at seeing his likeness etched into a reworking of Boucher's *Leda and the Swan*, a jarring reinterpretation if there ever was one. Hannibal has drawn a nude male Nemesis reclining not in a sensuously draped bed but against a rock amidst clouds, the pose reminiscent of none other than Michelangelo's famous *Creation of Adam* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The swan nuzzles furry genitalia, perfectly proportioned and of course, embarrassingly identical to his own. The eroticism is as blatant as it is beautiful. The memory of the morning Hannibal had sketched him in a similar pose, one leg dangling off the bed touching the floor and the other on the bed, knee bent to anchor him as he had lain among pillows staring out the window bursts into his brain unbidden.

What are you…? Again?

As you were, if you don't mind. I find it curious you could continue to sleep with one leg off the bed.

I'm going to fall off…

In a manner of speaking you already have. Bend your other knee, then. I've already drawn it that way in anticipation of your waking…eventually.

Will drains his tumbler of whiskey and sets it down on the desk his thoughts consumed with the associations winding around his head, memories, myth, and art like vines growing together to form a slender sapling sprouting in his own garden. The raven stag of his dreams appears beside his stream quietly grazing near the newly sprouted sapling. The crown of antlers lifts from the tender blades to look at Will when a gust of wind whips through his skull obliterating stag and garden.

Will stands again in his inferno, the serpent tailed creature at his side, its huge wings brushing his shoulders.

You're not alone, Will. I'm standing right beside you.

His hands find his face to rub at cheeks and chin, easing him back into the moment. He focuses instead at the collection of cityscapes Hannibal has drawn of the various churches, palazzos, and monuments of Florence. Almost at the same time, Hannibal emerges from the basement and Will hears him moving about the kitchen as though aware Will had finished his two fingers only seconds ago.

Will looks again at the pile of drawings. An indulgence of the imagination such as this confirms for Will that Hannibal spends far too much time alone. Also confirmed is Will's interpretation of Hannibal's mind if his *Nemesis and the Swan* are any indication. Hannibal has been identifying with that myth for a long time. Will also notices that although Hannibal signs his name to his works, and titles them, he does not date them. It is telling that he has drawn them all during the past year. The loneliness echoed throughout the house is also condensed into each drawing, a testament to Hannibal's near constant retreats into his memory palace. And if not his memory palace; a realm of fantasy.

The edges of one last sheet of charcoal covered paper sticks out from the other side of the desk, almost buried beneath the rest and Will carefully draws it out and places it on the top of the pile so he can better have a look at it. His nose begins to itch and his eyes moisten at the unexpected image. He stares at a drawing of his house in Wolf Trap, pulled from Hannibal's memory and a near identical recreation of the one he had drawn for Will. The familiar Cape Cod with the twin dormers and wide front porch seems to float upon a sea of fog and grass, the vantage point from precisely the same spot where Will had hiked with Hannibal one chilly gray morning before chaos had descended.

Hannibal's memory is impeccable. They had sat side by side, Will with binoculars and his portable fly-tying caddy and Hannibal with his drawing pad and leather art case unpacked and spread out on a blanket. Will had dropped the lure he had been working on in his lap, thread still attached to the spool secured to the caddy, his head angled to the side. Hannibal had been immersed in his endeavor, the drawing pad in his lap, body held rigidly erect in that way he had about him, charcoal pencil in hand, pinky up so the flesh of his palm would not smear the graphite over the paper.

You're staring, Will.

Does that make you uncomfortable?

Not at all. Where were you just now?

Right here. I…like it…here.

So do I.

The drawing Will holds in his hands replicates the scene right down to the fringe of pine branches that had framed the view and were part of the reason for Will liking this particular location.

Many times Will had found himself standing in his woods looking back at his house, the dogs meandering close by, and he had taken comfort from this very view. His little boat upon a peaceful sea.

There is a small imperfection. Will stares at the dried droplet that mars the scene and before he gives in to the vice that seems to squeeze his chest, he tells himself the blot could easily be a drop of water or Windex. The affecting little splash could be deliberate. He closes his eyes and thinks how callous he has become. Deception has always lurked in every corner of the universe they share, and the distrust courses through nerves with the same heat as the whiskey had coursed down his throat.

Conditioned behavior. Habits. Will considers he is interpreting evidence through a lens laden with the film of previous expectations. He imagines Hannibal is doing the same. Will supposes that's what happens when imagoes are less than ideal and commit epic offenses. The circle of violence and intimacy between them is ever present. Will thinks if he could witness a singular spontaneous act from Hannibal rather than the arranged calculations he sees before him, his expectations might shift a little.

He gazes through the archway into the kitchen. Perhaps an opportunity will present itself.

The absence of a harpsichord is noteworthy and the cavern of longing for happier times as Hannibal had put it widens. There is a piano, an antique baby grand in the corner by the doors leading out to the white washed stone and violet blue veined marble patio. Rather than joining Hannibal in the kitchen just yet, Will decides to inspect the piano.

Will's fingers glide across its smooth polished surface as he notes the decorated painted finish. Will thinks it a restored Eighteenth century original, the ornate flourishes decidedly French. A pastoral scene graces the sides of the burnished gold hued Grand piano. Cherubs and birds surround the lovers and Will notes the tiny brush strokes along the surface. The beautiful Neo-classical scene on the finely crafted piano is hand painted.

Will's eyes sweep over the ivory keys and he notes a thin layer of dust. Hannibal has not played recently. Will grins to himself as he sits on the bench perched at the edge. Hannibal must be slipping if he can't fit in his piano among the gardening, drawing, killing, and cooking. Beethoven's *Piano Sonata 21 in C* plays in the kitchen though the sound has been muted in the living room, and not coincidentally either, Will thinks with an involuntary curl of his lips.

He settles back on the bench, places his bare foot on the pedal and begins *Für Elise*, hesitantly at first then more *fortissimo* as his fingers remember the notes. He doesn't close his eyes as he plays and he wonders why he has never been able to trust his fingers to move over the keys without looking. He supposes he needs to see to be sure he doesn't make a mistake. Then again, he makes plenty of mistakes with his eyes open.

Do you play faultlessly in your imagination?

I've never played the piano in my imagination.

Perhaps you should try it sometime. Trust your instincts.

Will had tried this with Daniel with mixed results. He closes his eyes and releases the memories and associations from forts he has mended many times, to tumble like a waterfall and pool at the foothills of his consciousness and he imagines the water becoming still, the only vibrations come from his fingers striking the keys.

Hannibal stands in the doorway having heard the tentative tinkling from the living room. He had hoped Will would be tempted to play. The body remembers its conditioning and before long Hannibal is watching Will play with both hands rather than picking at keys with his right hand.

Aware that Will is attempting to keep his feelings dampened beneath the suit he compulsively puts on for Hannibal, Hannibal watches the slender form hunched over the piano shudder slightly and the blue eyes close as Will drifts with the music. Coating himself with the veneer of Hannibal here, in the villa, is instinctive. Wearing the entire suit had been an entirely different matter. The longer he had worn Hannibal's entire suit, the more difficult it had been to take it off. Will had believed he could pretend to be a version of Hannibal and remain separate from it. But Hannibal had known that Will would not be able to do both at the same time.

Will continues with his learned behavior as he sits at the piano and he will continue to do so until circumstances convince him to yield to Hannibal the vestiges of the suit and those places in his mind he keeps closely guarded.

Will fears what he has become. His inferno is all about that fear. Hannibal never viewed his own becoming as a descent into Hell. He had found it liberating. Will fears his impulses once loosed will consume him. He does not trust Hannibal to preserve his imago of self. He believes Hannibal means to destroy it, replace it with an imago of Hannibal's design. Will believes that Hannibal would rob him of his former self. Hannibal has only opened his eyes. Will is who he has always been. And Hannibal would have him as he is…bones and all.

Hannibal kneads the towel he holds in his hands as he watches Will approach the end of the first movement. Will's left hand is managing well enough but the right hand carrying the melody falters as Will moves into the second movement. Will and his transitions. He fears making a mistake and so he always does. He feared making a mistake in Baltimore. And he fears making one now.

Time to alleviate some of that fear.

Will's brows furrow in frustration, lips are drawn in a thin dissatisfied line and he plays a few more measures but then stops abruptly, his foot slipping off the pedal to burrow into the carpet instead. Hannibal clears his throat and only then does Will look up from the row of ivory. The pale blue eyes narrow as he considers how long Hannibal has been standing there rubbing at his dry hands with a dishtowel.

Hannibal glances at his desk takes into account the scattering of his drawings while Will chews at his lip, eyes following his gaze. Hannibal looks back at Will, raises a brow provocatively. Will lifts his head to meet Hannibal's gaze as he turns away from the desk and stubbornly back to the piano. Hannibal swallows the smile that threatens to spread across his face. The impulse to laugh aloud and release some of the pressure that simmers, that becomes more scintillating with every passing moment is difficult to control. Will would likely misinterpret the laughter given his mood.

That he has indulged his senses in the now rather than retreat into his mind is enough. The associations will continue to flow as Hannibal intended.

He walks toward the piano instead, intending to join Will on the bench, but Will rises from the bench to stand, halting his advance. The disappointment is profound. Patience. Too much sensation too soon Hannibal tells himself. Like many other things between them, Will's sensitivity is a double edged sword. Most often that sword is turned inward but when it is turned toward Hannibal that blade is…infuriating.

"It's um…Neo-classical isn't it?" Will says, gesturing at the piano as if he were referring to anything else.

"It is."

The soft curls are so close Hannibal could reach out his hand and touch the tousled mane, but he does not. Intimacy between them remains edged with violence, the double edged blade it has always been, a deftly wielded weapon in both their hands. Hannibal is satisfied Will touched nothing in the kitchen, but that does not mean Will's Berretta is the only weapon he brought.

Although detective Ruggerio lies rinsed and ready on his table downstairs his sacrifice does not entirely persuade. Will has agreed to remove the Greek and Trojans so they can have their honest conversation, but Will's agenda with him is not as straightforward as it appears. Neither is Hannibal's agenda with him. They are just alike, and for this reason, Hannibal cannot allow himself to be seduced by Will again. Not until more cards have been placed on the table.

For now Hannibal is content for memories and associations to tug at Will's conscious and subconscious mind. He has been in therapy for the last several weeks with an excellent psychiatrist. If anyone could reach into Will's head and heart as Hannibal had, it would be Clayton. And what is to be done about that?

Hannibal's eyes settle once more upon the tangled mane and the pale blue eyes, finally fixing on the finely shaped mouth. Of all the weapons in Will's arsenal, his mouth is most dangerous perhaps even more than the affecting pools of blue. Those supple lips can wrap around a phrase and twist it just so; triggering a range of responses in Hannibal quite unlike anyone else. Were it only phrases those petal soft lips had wrapped around, Hannibal might still be in Baltimore.

"I imagine something similar sat in the parlor of Louis the Fifteenth. This one is actually American made, an early twentieth century reproduction, but the attention to detail is exquisite."

"Is it possible this recreation sounds like the original?" Will says testing the water. Or teasing it; he's not entirely sure.

Hannibal ponders the loaded question as Will ducks his head and peers inside under the raised lid; slender fingers again slide along the varnished surface. He cannot resist the touching. Once he had become comfortable at his home in Baltimore, Will had touched everything. Hannibal believes the tactile sensations assist with the assimilating, the processing that occurs involuntarily. Always fascinating…his Will.

Hannibal considers it an auspicious beginning that it took Will considerably less time to feel comfortable here.

“I don’t believe I ever actually saw or heard the original.” Hannibal says with pointed neutrality.

“Are we…still talking about the piano?”

“I wasn’t aware we were talking of anything else. Dinner is almost ready. Would you mind assisting?”

Hannibal gestures toward the kitchen. Will sighs and looks aside, presenting the throat and finely cut jaw line he knows Hannibal desires to sink his teeth into. He clenches his teeth together, flexing his jaw slightly, expressing the annoyance Hannibal expects and he does not have to look to know Hannibal watches the movement of every muscle.

“I know what you are doing.” Will says turning toward the piano to offer the other side of his face.

“And I know that you know.” Hannibal says as he gazes at Will’s brazenly coy but appreciated pose.

Flesh wilts like a flower in the heat of Hannibal’s gaze and the familiar flush creeps along the smooth exposed skin, blood courses through veins as the delicate blush blooms clear to his cheeks. This is not conditioning. This…is an involuntary physical response to the pheromones that hang like damp fog between them. Hannibal inhales Will’s musky sweetness from where he stands savoring the scent he can recognize anywhere but cannot replicate in his memory palace.

If Will only knew Hannibal awakens every morning wishing to find that scent sifting through satin and to feast his eyes upon its source lying beside him. Hannibal considers the possibility that Will may have already guessed. If that is so, then it also possible Will awakens wishing, too.

Will thinks he is testing Hannibal when he is actually testing himself. He trusts Hannibal not to violate his personal space so soon, so he bares his throat, offers the beauty of the flesh to prompt memory and sensation within because he needs to step out of his imagination and actually feel. He has subconsciously or consciously perhaps recreated the familiar paradigm. Therapist and patient. Mentor and pupil. Creator and created.

“There would appear to be little we do not know about each other.” Hannibal nods toward the desk, moving back and turning slightly to give Will his much desired space.

“But that little may as well be a galaxy.” Will’s softly spoken words spill into the piano.

“The sacrifice you brought to the table carries those galaxies into a closer orbit.”

“And here we are, spinning stars at the event horizon of chaos.”

“It is from chaos that spinning stars are born.”

Will continues to stare into the depths of the piano, fingers still idly polishing the sleek finish.

“No harpsichord here.”

“No. Perhaps next time.”

“No…salon.”

“We’ll make another.” Hannibal intones confidently as though merely wishing made it so.

Will smiles into the piano at that. “You wanted me to find you. Why?”

Will already knows why and he seeks confirmation, no matter how oblique from Hannibal. Hannibal is willing to make concessions for the cub, but so must the cub be willing to engage in a little quid pro quo. Will has his own agenda, apart from everyone else’s including Hannibal.

“Why did you come?”

“I still have to deal with you. I can’t seem to get you out of my head.”

That much Hannibal believes. “Likewise.” comes the quiet reply.

Will’s chest constricts and he marvels he finds the gentle response both painful and achingly sweet. The fear he will lose himself and be swallowed up again hovers over the horizon of his mind, and the fear streams across those foothills where the pool of water ripples with vibrations. He steels himself against the sigh of Mephistopheles’ dulcet siren.

“You became what I wanted to catch me.” Hannibal prods.

“I told myself that.”

“Do you know why you came here? Do you know what you want now?”

Will runs his hand over the opened lid of the Grand testing its sturdiness. Hannibal is aware Will has pulled on his Hannibal suit again. He wants what he always wants. He wants Will; not the suit and he is never quite sure which he is getting at any moment. He wants to know if Will still desires to catch him. And Will does. But not for the FBI and certainly not for Mason. For his own design.

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.” He ducks under the lid.

“Try me.”

“What do you want?” Will demurs.

“Would you believe me? What do you imagine I would like?” Hannibal parleys.

“Oh, no…” Will shakes a finger at nothing in particular, head still buried inside the piano, “Creators often feel contempt for their creations when they don’t live up to…expectations.”

Hannibal notices the tremor of Will’s right hand as he pulls it away from the piano then pauses in mid-air catching himself before he tugs at his shirt to touch the wound beneath. Lips press tight together in a silent berating as Will grips the edges of the piano once again.

“Creations have a nasty habit of presuming to know what those expectations are. They make… mistakes.”

“As though the fault lay in the clay and not the hands that fashioned it.”

Hannibal nods toward Delacroix's lithograph in the hall. "I suppose you would see me as Mephistopheles to your Faust?"

"You are the corruptor of souls."

"I think if you read more closely you would agree that Mephistopheles noticed something already corrupt in the conflicted Faust, as yet unaware of his…indifference to it."

"Not…indifferent." Will says so softly Hannibal sees the lips form the words rather than actually hear them fall.

"Afraid, then." Hannibal offers, almost as quietly.

Hannibal folds the dishtowel, once, twice, and again and waits for Will's response as his fingers play along the plush fibers, imagining silky curls between them instead. Will's Mephistopheles has found a corrupt and kindred spirit with whom to share his secrets and his bed. Perhaps the corrupted spirit no longer has the desire to strive in his inferno and shakes his fist at his creator instead. Because for Will, God and Satan have become one and the same.

Will plucks at the strings beneath the tiny hammers feeling the vibration of each note. The note one hears from the piano is the result of a complex process. The key is directly connected to the hammer. The key is depressed and the hammer raises, with the release of the key, the hammer strikes the strings and the ensuing vibration becomes sound. Hannibal is not striking the keys at the moment, he is stroking them so the hammer in Will's chest touches the strings lightly, *molto sotto,* releasing vibrations faint and familiar, summoning the singular melody neither has forgotten.

"You'll have to give all this up." Will says, too brusquely looking around the room as his mind retreats from the intimacy of that melody.

"My association with you seems to necessitate that…frequently. Once again, you cause me to leave."

The tone is tart, pointedly so. Will hears the crashing of dissonant chords, and tongue quickly alights upon lips.

"Your choice to accept the invitation as you did." Will says.

Will plucks again at hammers and strings. It is he who strikes the keys now, sharply and unapologetically.

"As you have accepted mine…again."

Hannibal pauses to consider how best to proceed from here. Will is predictably prickly, but otherwise…unpredictable. Will expects Hannibal to preside over the festivities just as Hannibal expects Will to subvert and otherwise challenge the expectations he already knows very well. Hannibal would have it no other way. There is, however, one expectation they already share.

"We agreed on a truce."

"We have an agreement."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend, as least for the duration of the agreement. Since deception is the currency we seem to exchange, perhaps out of habit…"

“Habits are difficult to break.”

“They can be. Shall we continue to speak through our imagoes? We have agreed to use our ideals of each other to frame our discussion and guide the narrative of our...”

“Courtship?” Will looks up from the interior of the piano and smiles benignly at Hannibal.

“Is that what we are doing?” Hannibal says bland as milk. And yet, the word elicits a deliciously wicked ripple within. *Fool me once…*

Will thinks Hannibal’s stoic tone a little forced. Too much like the tone he used to use in his office. He decides to press to see what else pops out.

“Isn’t it? Love letters written in blood?” Will lowers his voice, “You know they’re saying we’re in love.”

“Are we?”

“It’s been said there’s a thin line between love and hate.”

“It is possible we dance upon that line.”

“It is also possible we always will.”

“While we dance, then we are agreed sins of omission are permitted but the framework remains?”

“Agreed.”

“I imagine it was difficult for you to come here.”

“I imagine it is difficult for you to have me here.”

“While you are here we will be alone with each other, requiring certain assurances of…behavior. No…even Steven?”

“You believe I still want to kill you.” Will coughs out a bitter laugh. “Isn’t that calling the kettle black…”

“Words alone are not binding enough; not for us. I propose we remove our armor…for dinner.”

“What did you have in mind?” Will says, wary of removing anything other than the shoes he has already taken off. His eyes involuntarily seek the leather loafers on the other side of the room.

“There was a short truce between Greeks and Trojans in the *Iliad*.”

“Yes. The fight between Menelaus and Hector, but Agamemnon talks him out of it. Thinks Hector will kill his brother. Ajax takes on Hector instead, but the gods intervene and break it up before much happens. Ajax and Hector exchange gifts, swear friendship and there’s a truce, a couple nights of feasting.”

Will remembers the truce that prompts the Trojans to consider appeasing the Greeks, but Paris will not give Helen back. The truce does not last long, but long enough to burn and bury their dead. Will is beginning to think Hannibal has scripted this entire encounter around the *Iliad*. Hannibal could conceivably apply the *Iliad* to just about anything. He probably already does.

“You mean for our meal to be a truce. To set our armor and our…wounds aside.”

“And…weapons.” Hannibal adds just to clarify there be no sins of omission.

Will thinks opportunity has presented itself. With a little help from Hannibal. Hannibal has not asked him to place his weapon in plain sight but with the kitchen littered with plenty of implements Will thinks Hannibal’s insistence on a gesture their ideals would respect genuine.

“Courtesy remains the cornerstone of civilization. I cannot offer assurances of honest intentions because you are not yet ready to hear them. And neither am I inclined to believe you. It is our nature.”

“And until that changes…”

“We will exchange tokens of respect. Hector gave Ajax his sword and scabbard.”

Hannibal reaches into his apron and retrieves the knife he had given to Will to use on the Paolini. He extends the claw shaped folded knife actually folded this time to Will. Will takes it from his hand and opens it slowly, eyes widening as he recognizes the weapon. The pale blue eyes smolder as lips twist in consternation. But, out comes the tongue to soothe the petulance away and Will nods graciously and slips the knife into his pocket.

“And…Ajax gave Hector his belt.” Will says.

Will’s fingers are already loosening his belt buckle as he speaks. He removes the slender strip of leather from the loops of beleaguered trousers that immediately slide from waist to hips and hands the belt off to Hannibal. Although relieved the conversation will remain focused Will also feels the weight of disappointment riding his shoulders right alongside dread. They will eventually have to confront their feelings and each other and Will dreads this particular confrontation because he is not sure he can do what he intends to do should Hannibal say what Will imagines he will say.

First things first. They have Greeks and Trojans to discuss. And Eve. Will thinks Hannibal will have a difficult time weaseling out of explaining his association with Du Maurier. The thought of getting his answers about her grounds him in the moment and he assumes the version of himself he knows Hannibal expects.

The Will Hannibal wants remains beyond his reach for now. Will is grateful that Ajax had offered Hector nothing else. He can’t keep giving Daniel’s clothes away.

“A dissection of events in Baltimore will have to wait until we have secured our firmer ground here in Florence. But a dissection…is imminent.” Hannibal says, gesturing toward the kitchen.

“You do remember that Ajax commits suicide with Hector’s sword and Achilles uses the belt Ajax gave Hector to tie him to his chariot so he could drag his body for all the Trojans to see.”

“Our *Iliad* is yet to be written.”

Will thinks of *Leda and the Swan*. He can see another print of it hanging in the dining room. The promise of forgiveness – a different Helen – a different *Iliad*.

Will gazes at Hannibal's garden from the veranda. The swimming pool he could not see from the other side of the yard is typically oversized and ostentatiously decorated with statuettes of dolphins and sea nymphs, a pool fit for Poseidon or an emperor. Will imagines Hannibal climbing out of it to seek refuge from the Tuscan sun beneath the cool shade of the veranda, sipping extravagant wine and reveling in the beauty of his garden.

Longing for the one who was supposed to join him there. Hating him for being the source of his pain. They are just alike and alone without each other.

Will holds the kitchen door open for Hannibal to pass through with the basket of tomatoes he left outside. He notes Ruggerio's clothes and shoes on a chair on the veranda. Hannibal has set them there to be incinerated in the yard. Will retrieves Ruggerio's phone from his pocket and hands it to Hannibal.

"It's not on. He must have shut it off. I'm guessing in Impruneta. It's not police issue and I don't know what he has programmed into it, but I can't turn it on to find out."

"Or to confirm his last call. If it's off, what can the FBI learn?"

Hannibal unpacks the tomatoes and begins to wash them over the sink, glancing out the window every now and again as he sets the ripe and glossy fruit in a bowl after rinsing each under a cool trickle of water.

"Nothing except that it last pinged off a tower in Impruneta which will be consistent with what I tell them." Will says.

"We need only to confuse them."

"Ambiguity, I know. By the time they figure it out…"

Will falls silent. Hannibal considers the downturned eyes and wonders at the unfinished thought far from his reach. Will lifts his head and his arms draw up to cradle torso, fingers kneading at flesh in an effort to contain his mind. Hannibal can almost image the flames of his inferno licking at his feet.

Will is acclimating, awash in a flood of memories as his senses attempt to absorb his surroundings. He wraps his arms around himself in response to that flood of images. Hannibal imagines the scar hiding beneath the wrinkled shirt and knows Will would be caressing his wound rather than his forearms if he were alone.

But he is not alone, and he must learn how to share his pain with Hannibal; not hide it from him. Hannibal knows exactly how he cut Will, can imagine the sutures in his mind, but to actually see the wound he carved into Will's flesh will be as painful for Hannibal as it was for Will to look after removing the bandages and gazing at the raised ribbon left by the ER surgeons for the first time. Hannibal wants to look upon that flesh to satisfy his curiosity and he needs to face his pain, too.

Will is not ready to share his wound and neither is Hannibal ready to share this particular pain with him. The sharing of wounds such as these requires far more intimacy than either of them is prepared offer. The circumstances are not yet in place.

Hannibal dismisses thoughts of the clothes on the veranda. No need to dispose of them this minute. He burns the evidence out of habit, and in this instance, the evidence does not matter. He glances at Will's face and realizes Will is again drifting into those places Hannibal cannot follow.

Will stares past the veranda into the backyard at the flock of ravens gathering around the pool, but like the constant ripple of heat across his stomach and the thing that coils inside, they refuse to go away. He tells himself he won't have to endure any of this for much longer, one way or another.

Hannibal turns from the window over the sink to Will. The flash of metal in his hands registers immediately and Will flinches as he stares into Hannibal's impassive face as Hannibal brings the wide bladed chef's knife flush with Will's midriff. He quickly raises his hand to present it to Will blade down.

"You need to stop doing that." Will says, taking the knife from his hands.

"I was attempting to redirect your associations." Hannibal says simply, assuming the matter of fact tone of therapist once again.

"Well…it's not working." Will snaps. "We agreed to put armor and wounds aside for dinner."

Hannibal hands him the bowl of rinsed tomatoes. "Slices. As thin as possible. Topping for the focaccia."

Will promptly sets bowl and knife on the cutting board. "What are you planning to do with Ruggerio?"

"Tsk. Tsk. He is a Greek. What are Achilles and Patroclus to do with him?"

"Patroclus has appearances to keep."

Will knows every time he kills it becomes easier. Easier to do it, and to contemplate it and to rationalize it afterward. Varying degrees of regret notwithstanding. Hannibal knows it, too. He is counting on it.

"So he does." Hannibal agrees, "Hiding one's identity is much easier than revealing it. At least you can honestly say that you didn't kill him…technically speaking, of course."

Will rubs at his face. "More sins of omission." he mutters, looking dismally at the bowl of tomatoes.

"Leave Ruggerio to me. Agamemnon will not be able to sweep his culpability under the rug. And Achilles would not have Patroclus in chains."

"Menelaus can continue to give Patroclus the benefit of the doubt. For a little longer."

Hannibal nods at Will to start on the tomatoes. He turns to the counter to place the final touches on the entrée before setting it aside.

"You said you could see good and evil in the garden. And what of God? Is the sacrifice downstairs an act of God?"

Is this meat an act of God, Will?

“Ask the sacrifice. Good invites the presence of God. Evil in the broadest sense suggests that God does not exist. Because what good God allows evil to run rampant throughout creation.”

“How can we exist in such a world?” Hannibal says listening to the pleasant sound of the knife scraping against the wood as Will slices.

“Exactly. But we do. Despite our best intentions to see good, evil pervades so we learn to live with disappointment and exist in the best of all possible worlds.”

“Do we? That is the flaw in Christianity. Believing that God is inherently good.”

The devil is not as dark as he is painted.

Was his winged Daniel implying then that neither is God as light as he appears? His inferno is not entirely dark. Will thinks of his inferno, the only light smothered in a hazy glow of rust, rot, and blood. The light is obscured by all the darkness, but not gone out. He pauses, knife poised over cutting board to glance at Hannibal by the stove. Hannibal is hardly dark at the moment. He is positively radiant. This is the Hannibal Will has missed and Will turns back to the tomatoes, clinging to another stolen moment.

“Dante believed that God created good and evil, that he sits apart from us, indifferent to suffering and immune from our judgment. We lack the wisdom to question his divine will.” Will says.

“The ancient Greeks did not view their gods as morally perfect, but as susceptible to corruption as themselves. Justice and punishment theirs to interpret and bestow at will.”

“Their gods rewarded and punished on whims; Greek democracy provided courts to dispense justice.

“Or punishment.”

“Justice is not synonymous with punishment.”

“The Greeks modeled themselves after their gods, endeavoring to rise above their petty vices.”

“And often found themselves at odds with them. Inviting hubris and punishment.” Will says, lifting a brow.

Hannibal turns slightly from the sink to catch a glimpse of blue before Will tilts his head and lowers his eyes so a line of lashes favors him instead. The inclined head and parted lips draw an almost audible sigh from Hannibal. He has missed this sparring so much. To stand here with Will seems dreamlike, as though they once again exist in that other world where the teacup had not shattered. The world where Will does not grimace every time he glances down at his shirt.

“Justice and punishment are more gifts mankind gave itself. God can’t be bothered, so man punishes himself.” Hannibal says.

“Justice and punishment were meted out by the gods.”

“Punishment, perhaps. Justice in is the eye of the beholder.”

I collect church collapses… Was that evil? Was that God? If he’s up there, he just loves it. Typhus and swans, Will. It all comes from the same place.

“Isn’t justice an attribute of goodness, of God? Its virtuous conferral the measure of a man?”

“The Greek philosophers deliberated on a similar dilemma. The consequences of having the power to become invisible are explored in Plato’s Republic.”

“The Ring of Gyges. In all respects be like a god among men…” Will’s eyes crease with amusement, “You would be the wearer of the ring of invisibility.”

“Ethics, like God, is a concept. Justice is often conditioned upon circumstance. You, on the other hand, exist in Plato’s cave.”

“And I am dazzled by the excess of light?” Will chuckles and shakes his head; turning slightly from the tomatoes he slices to point the knife at Hannibal. “The ethical man knows what is right; the moral man actually does what is right - magical ring or not. I don’t expect to be free. Rules and order are necessary.”

“I agree. Then, do you believe your actions to be good and right? Or do you believe that you are not a moral man?”

Will slices the remaining tomato and sets the knife on the cutting board. Morality used to be a distinct concept, clear as glass of water he could drink, but the glass became murky, dark, and stained with bloody fingerprints. The concept has shifted in his mind as his feet seem to shift in the sand beneath him. He looks over his shoulder at Hannibal before he sinks into the floor.

“Morality is defined by the presence or absence of agreed upon values.”

“Is it the best of all possible worlds where justice becomes not a moral value but merely the means to mediate the consequences of what we refer to as good and evil? Highly malleable concepts. You are learning by degrees to endure the light.”

“Plato wasn’t talking about undermining the laws of his society.”

“No, he was talking about ignorance. Socratic wisdom looks to recognize limitations and subsequently challenge and break through those limits. There is no right or wrong. No good or evil. Only ignorance and enlightenment. The limitations viewed from the perspective of the cave. I choose to ignore those limitations.”

“And what do you expect to happen?”

“I don’t know. But I am curious. And so are you.”

“You are curious if I am the just man who would put on the second ring of invisibility.”

“If you wish to cast me in the role of the unjust man, yes. But, to be free of the limitations of ignorance. Like God.”

“Partake from the tree of knowledge.”

“Yes.”

“God creates good and evil, Adam and the serpent, throws them all in the garden together, leaves it to his creation to muddle through, and abandons him when he makes a mistake.” Will says.

“If that is the best of all possible worlds, surely there must be others. In another world, God cultivated his garden, his creation right beside him.”

“Then the sacrifice downstairs is an act of God, insofar as God created man to exercise his free will.”

Hannibal smiles. So clever…his nearly free Will.

“I’ll finish the focaccia. Why don’t you take your seat and choose the wine?”

Hannibal gestures to the dining room and waits until Will has passed through the archway to pick up the remote. He adjusts the volume of the speakers and clicks to the appropriate selection.

Will tries to ignore the flushing heat that stubbornly persists beneath his clothes as Hannibal stands beside him pouring wine from a bottle Will knows is as rarefied as the cuisine laid out before him. He may as well pull out the best from his wine cellar rather than leave it to the FBI like last time. Will can only imagine the booty carted from Hannibal’s former home somehow getting lost on the way to Quantico.

His nerves tingle with the proximity of flesh and fragrance reduced to recreations in his mind until recently. The uncomfortable warmth he is experiencing must be apparent to Hannibal. He had felt the blush of embarrassment prickle along his neck as soon as he walked into the dining room. He had turned around to find Hannibal behind him, pleasure passing quickly across the otherwise impassive features save for the bead in the luminous eyes. He had favored Hannibal with a hint of a smile before walking to the table to examine the assortment of wines. He had involuntarily provided Hannibal exactly the response he had wanted to elicit with the hearts and flowers and… dinner.

The hearts and flowers are both figurative and literal. Quite literal. And inarguably edible. The hearts and flowers are dinner. The previously wrapped entrees in the kitchen now sit on the elaborately decorous dining room table and they appear as appetizing as they likely taste. Saliva pools beneath his tongue, and Will wonders that he is both excited and repulsed.

Despite the decoration, Hannibal’s usual ostentation is subdued. This is not the elegant dining room in Baltimore. The refinement is of an entirely different aesthetic, more aligned with the Tuscan countryside than the distant city across the sea.

And yet, the orchestrations of seduction abound, the ultimate destination implied in every detail, a sensual appeal to emotion. The color red dominates here, the connotations associated with the bold primary color inescapable and in this instance apropos. From the cut blood red roses selected this morning to the *Iliad* inspired centerpiece, a red-figure style kylix embedded in a wreath of white and bright crimson hyacinths that spill from the wide shallow bowl.

Hannibal begins pulling up his chair to sit, eyes never wandering far from Will. Hannibal’s constant appraising is so transparent to qualify as rude. Will considers telling him so, but decides he need not fuel the fire. He is quite warm enough already.

Will gently brushes the soft petals aside to better see the rest of the image that has snared his attention. The scene painted under the glazed surface depicts Achilles and Patroclus, one of many among other scenes on the large cratered bowl that Hannibal will surely expound upon over their meal. This scene requires no interpretation from Hannibal.

Surprisingly, the images of their ideals are not erotically engaged, rather Achilles attends a wounded Patroclus. He ties a bandage to one arm as Patroclus sits cross-legged and still. The eyes of the Greek heroes are enlarged to express the pathos and affection between the warriors. It is a tender moment between them and Will does not miss the physical similarities. This Achilles is uncharacteristically beardless while Patroclus' face is graced with a thin mustache and wisp of a beard.

Hannibal is…apologizing. Will will never hear the words from his lips, but he is expressing his regret in his own way. Will leans back allowing the red and white petals to tumble over the figures as visions of crimson and white sails fill his mind quickly followed by the flowing curtains of Hannibal's former office. Will does not miss the message embedded in the flowers either. Hyacinths symbolize rebirth. Named for the fallen lover of Apollo, his blood had become the flower. Hope springs eternal in Hannibal.

It also croons from the sound system. An opera hums unobtrusively so that the soaring voices are discernable, but not so loudly that conversation is impaired. Neither are associations.

"Laying it on a little thick, aren't you?" Will asks as Hannibal sets the wine on the table.

Hannibal resists the tart retort that rises to his lips, eschewing innuendo in favor of tact…for the moment.

"The feast is a celebration isn't it? Appropriate that we look to the past and the future as we sit grounded in the moment on the verge of chaos."

"Reflections from a broken glass, the drink already tasted."

"Tasted, yes, but not sated. You are still thirsty."

"And you…are still hungry."

"So I am. Let's eat. But first, at toast."

Will grips the stem of his glass. "What are we toasting?"

"I defer to you."

Will frowns in thought and leans back into his straight backed chair to gaze at Hannibal on the other side of the table. He can't think of anything profound yet innocuous. After a moment he leans back across the table and lifts his glass.

"To a mutually satisfying collaboration."

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, contemplating the drawn lips and earnest expression. He lifts his glass and thinks the toast as heartfelt as Will is willing to offer and taps his glass against Will's, and stares into unblinking blue pools to the soft chime of crystal.

Will eyes Hannibal over his glass as he drinks, Hannibal a mirror image across from him. The wine goes down like liquid velvet, pleasantly dry. They set down their glasses at the same time.

“Quite the feast.” Will says watching Hannibal select portions from each dish to place on Will’s, then his own plate. “Not your usual multiple course presentation.”

“It’s just the two of us, no pretensions.” Hannibal continues to arrange the food on the plates. “It is a mostly Sardinian menu, all the dishes authentic I assure you.”

“Right down to the ingredients I’m sure.”

“The meat…was raised in Tuscany I believe.”

“Well, pork is pork wherever you go.”

“Actually the meat from the Pata Negra can be more expensive than Kobe beef. A pig from the Iberian Peninsula, barley fed for the first couple months then allowed to roam free and cured for over a year. Just before slaughter they are fed acorns to give the meat a nutty flavor.”

“Good to know.” Will says with a doleful roll of his eyes. “Still, this is surprisingly unpretentious for you, almost peasant fare.”

“Was that a compliment?”

“I think so.” Will takes a sip of wine, letting the tart fruity flavors loose to roll over his tongue. “Lots of fat and protein here. I expected more seafood.”

“Sardinian cuisine is provincial, very much peasant fare. Being an island and prone to foreign invaders on the coast, the indigenous people moved to the interior. Lots of sheep, lamb, and pig in the diet, chicken and rabbits.”

“So, what are we eating?”

“A very naughty pig.”

“This is…a lot of pig.”

“She was a very healthy pig, too.” Hannibal says all business. “We have…Tuscan liver tartare…”

“What are the flowers?”

“Nasturtium, not a garnish, they are quite tasty. A peppery compliment to the meat.”

Will slips a brilliant red petal into his mouth, raises his brows at the texture as the piquant flower melts.

“And…Sardinian coietta similar to Italian braciole, stuffed meat ravioli with gorgonzola, and pan seared heart with persillade, very rare and…chilled.”

“You’ve been busy.” Will says, eyeing the gold lipped plate of sliced heart, firm but bright red.

Hannibal had to have procured the heart from another unsuspecting donor. Lucia’s heart is in the FBI’s lab. The rest of the meat on the table is…Lucia. Will thinks of Luciano’s remains stuffed into the freezer in Daniel’s basement. Hannibal would not approve, but Will doesn’t plan on eating them.

“Why chilled?”

Hannibal pauses, dips his nose into his glass and takes a generous swallow. His eyes do not leave Will’s face as he sets the delicate crystal on the table.

“So that it can be warmed again in its consummation, of course.”

Will almost snorts but for the serious expression on Hannibal’s face and the incendiary gleam in the dark eyes, challenging Will to mock his sentimental overture. Hannibal’s emotions are nothing to be trifled with. Will’s fingers find the ridge of the scar beneath his shirt before he realizes what he is doing. He nods slowly as stares into the proud and deceptively passive face across the table.

Fool me once, shame on you; but fool me twice…

Hannibal will tear him apart…slowly, if Will should betray him after a declaration like this. Even without their honest conversation, Hannibal has extended much more than an olive branch. Memories fire off like sparks in his brain. Images of naked limbs glistening in firelight tumble before his eyes and he feels himself falling like twisted sheets of satin onto the floor.

He takes a sip of wine to ease him back to the moment. There is a part of Will that would succumb right now, the part that would snatch up a hunk of cold fleshy heart, shove it in his mouth and then reach across the table to stick his bloody tongue down Hannibal’s throat.

He hates that he wants to. Another part of him wants to escape the relentless inferno that even now threatens to crash through the walls of the dining room, the desolate landscape shimmers in the late afternoon sun just beyond the windows. Daniel had warned him…

He takes up the serving spatula and with more poise than he thought possible manages to drop a couple of slices of the seared and cold heart onto his plate much to Hannibal’s delight. Will feels like he is unraveling, his entire being naked, transparent; the unveiling of identities already begun.

He is being manipulated. Hannibal knows how his mind works, how he can be overwhelmed by his empathy. He is counting on it. He is bombarding Will with sensation, associations, and memories. The wine almost curdles in his stomach and Will welcomes the anger and the hate. These are comfortable emotions. The hate will keep him focused. The anger will reassert the edge he arrived with and keep him out of the bedroom.

He understands Hannibal can’t help himself. It is his nature to hedge his bets, leave nothing to chance. He wants what he wants and he wants Will. Will’s betrayal in Baltimore reinforced his compulsive tendencies and cranked up a pathology already finely tuned.

With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you.

Will remains unpredictable to Hannibal. Hannibal is wary of manipulation from Will. He had manipulated Hannibal outside just a short while ago. Was it manipulation or was Hannibal aware and permitted Will the illusion? Who is manipulating whom? What was it Daniel had said?

If you fail to capitalize on your advantage what would that suggest to him?”

A lesser predator. Content to allow the other to dictate the terms. You know a little something about manipulation I think.

All psychiatry is manipulation. And there are plenty of weaknesses being exploited here.

Daniel had been referring to himself and Will along with Hannibal, but he had made his point. Will wants this. He hates that he wants this. He cannot want this right now. There is only one way to find out whose manipulation is most effective. There are still players on the board. Hidden agendas unraveling as identities are revealed. Will has to play this game to the end. To the truth then, and all its consequences.

Will takes up knife and fork and slices off a chunk of the gelatinous heart and slips it into his mouth. The morsel slides deliciously along his tongue and between his teeth and dissolves in a burst of flavor, the tang of fresh meat overpowering. But it is the rich buttery taste of the meat that triggers a nearly orgasmic shiver. He does not look up at Hannibal until he swallows the second mouthful, unable to mask the sheer delight. Something akin to panic sets in. Will is not upset that he eats human flesh. He is upset because he is enjoying it. Truly enjoying it.

Hannibal slices off a healthy portion of the heart as Will slips another forkful between trembling lips. The organ is so tender he does not have to chew and Hannibal savors the flavorful morsel as he watches Will eat. Watching Will eat has always been a pleasure, if the term pleasure even approaches the scope of sensual satisfaction the simple act of swallowing engenders. Hannibal thinks not. The soft moan Will utters as he lifts another morsel to his lips is gratifying, but it is the look of bewilderment in his eyes as he looks up from his plate that enthralls. The confusion quickly dissipates, and a smile as slick as sex erupts. Their eyes lock.

He is mine. Hannibal thinks. *It is only a matter of time.*

“From which tree does Adam partake now?” Hannibal asks.

“Forbidden fruit is always the sweetest.” Will mutters slipping another forkful in his mouth.

They eat without speaking, frequently looking at each other over wine glasses and forkfuls of the delectable entrees, each readjusting to the presence of the other while memories of happier times are summoned with the food, the act of sharing it, and the music.

For Will, it is a constant battle to strike a balance between past and present, between imagination and reality. His nightmare watches him devour Hannibal’s decadent feast with the same relish as Will gulps down bite after bite of tender ravioli. The coietta is suffused with subtle notes of saffron; the rolled bundle of meat filled with seasoned stuffing also melts in his mouth. The wine flows.

For Hannibal, it is a constant battle to conceal the intense satisfaction that sweeps over his heart like a tongue licking a wound which, he supposes is essentially what is going on. He watches the smacking of lips and the curling of the tongue that darts between the moist red petals as Will slips a sliver of coietta from his fork into his mouth, the tines hovering close as brows furrow in uncontested bliss. Hannibal almost breaks into a grin watching Will sop up the delicately flavored river of sauce left in the wake of the ravioli.

“What are we listening to?” Will asks finally after actually paying attention to the opera that has been playing all along, but largely ignored in the tide of sensations Will cannot assimilate quickly enough. It’s Italian that much he knows, but he is certain he has not heard it before.

“*Don Carlo*. Verdi. Not familiar with it?”

“No…but I’m sure you played it for a reason.”

“Have you been listening closely?”

“My grasp of Italian does not extend to singing.”

“It is the story of two men, Carlo and Rodrigo who live during the oppressive reign of Philip II. The two men are aligned with Flanders, seeking independence from Spain. Carlo is in love with the queen and of course does something rash. Rodrigo takes some subversive documents from Carlo to keep safe knowing his friend’s rash actions will have consequences. Carlo is arrested. Rodrigo visits him in prison explaining that he allowed the documents to be discovered on him, and he knows he will be executed for taking the blame for the insurrection.”

“It’s an opera; I gather it doesn’t end well.”

“While visiting Carlo, Rodrigo is shot. He dies in Carlo’s arms.”

Will listens more closely. He realizes that is the scene he hears now, Don Carlo’s tenor and Rodrigo’s baritone ring out, powerful voices at first gradually becoming softer, more tortured as Rodrigo approaches the moment of his death .

Ah! The world slips away from me … O Carlos! Your hand… Ah, I die with a happy soul…

“Is the insurrection successful?” Will asks, interested to know if Rodrigo’s sacrifice had been vain.

“Within the scope of the opera we never know, but…”

“Flanders remained under Spanish control. What happens to Carlo?”

“He is dragged by his grandfather’s ghost into a tomb. The curtain falls.”

“And the power of the state, corrupt as it is, prevails.”

“But the friendship of the heroes exists beyond the reach of the society that would condemn them.”

“One died so the other could live, but the other died anyway.”

“One at peace with the idea of dying, the other…not.”

Hannibal observes the pale blue eyes waver, a crease quivers in the folds of the lids as lashes lower and lips press together. Sadness crawls like a shadow across Will’s pensive face. Hannibal reaches for the Sardinian cheese Will has either not noticed or has been avoiding. Hannibal thinks the latter.

The yellowed creamy cheese sits under glass; the rind containing it wobbles slightly as Hannibal lifts the dome. Will’s eyes flutter to the tinkling of the crystal. Brows rise inquisitively until the eyes fix on the mottled mound and he grimaces.

“The casu marzu goes well with the tartare. Try some.”

“Looks like vomit.”

Hannibal chuckles impatient to see Will’s reaction when he realizes the vomit moves.

“A Sicilian delicacy, illegal in Italy but readily available nonetheless. Made from sheep’s milk, the aging and fermentation process is unique.”

Will’s eyes widen as he peers more closely. The grimace turns to bona fide disgust.

“There are worms in the cheese. And they are moving…”

“Fly larvae. They make the cheese incredibly soft, so soft that it cries. *Lagrima* in Sardinian means tears.”

“I imagine crying is what you do if you eat this stuff.”

Will leans closer still and typically cannot resist touching. As his finger alights on the sticky surface the tiny maggots wriggle about in the tears, burrowing deeper into the cheese. Will begins to poke the cheese with the tip of his knife.

“Careful. The larvae can jump several inches if provoked.”

The look on Will’s face is truly priceless as he whisks the knife away without a second thought. Then, seeming to change his mind, an activity Hannibal figures occurs with some frequency in Will, he prods the muddy looking cheese from the rind, inciting the larvae to jump. Pale blue eyes light up as a couple of white worms propel themselves onto the tablecloth.

“Do you eat the um…larvae with the cheese?”

“Some people do. Most pick them out. The flavor is quite pungent, an acquired taste for those blessed with an intrepid palate.”

“After you.” Will says.

Hannibal picks up a wedge of focaccia and tears off a piece. He smears a dollop of the squirming cheese onto the bread and folds it into his mouth. Will’s lips twist as he watches, face contorted as he compulsively creates the sensations in his mind. He swallows the same time as Hannibal, completely empathizing with him. So incredibly fascinating…his Will.

Will takes a breath and dips his knife into the rind, scoops up a rotting chunk and spreads it across the chunk of focaccia he takes from Hannibal’s hand. He hesitates only a second before pushing bread, cheese and maggots into his mouth. The taste of ammonia explodes nearly singeing his sinuses. He swallows and the burn of the aftertaste remains sharp.

“That…is really acidic for cheese. It’s like eating decomposition.”

“Quite the opposite, the cheese is only eaten while the larvae are alive and the products of their digestion ferment and flavor the cheese. The larvae are not dead until you eat them.”

Will looks at the cheese as he slides his tongue over his teeth, the taste pervasive and as Hannibal had said, very pungent. It occurs to Will that the selection of this cheese was as deliberate as the rest of the décor and menu. Hannibal has served up both murder and mercy. Curious to see if Will would pick off the maggots or…kill them. Judgement and punishment. Beauty and ugliness. Good and evil. Acts of God.

He licks at his lips pondering the apparently long lasting consequence of his actions.

Hannibal chases the cheese with a gulp of the Masseto Toscana, an Italian grown merlot from the Tenuta dell’Ornellaia vineyards, moderately priced at around six hundred Euros a bottle.

Will swirls the wine and as he stares into his glass at the ruby colored liquid sloshing from side to side he thinks of the ocean, of Pachelbel's *Canon in D,* the sounds of waves washing up the shore to the strains of violins and thoughts of Daniel quickly follow. Daniel had had serious misgivings about him coming here and for good reason. Daniel had tried to prepare him and Will realizes that Daniel has done exactly that.

Daniel also knows how his mind works. Daniel has been reinforcing the associations Will has been experiencing while mulling over his wine in anticipation of Will's reunion with Hannibal. Associations intended to ground him as they are now. To help reinforce who he is so that he does not completely become the version of Hannibal like he used to. Daniel had understood Will's fear.

This was a key part of Daniel's therapy. He introduced a new scaffolding of associations Will can graft onto the existing ones. Daniel cannot undo what Hannibal has done, what Will allowed him to do, but he has supplied Will with the mental tools he needs to hold on to that part of himself he wants to keep.

"Antenor's revenge takes shape as we dine. What are Menelaus and Agamemnon up to?"

Hannibal's voice startles and Will lets the ocean and Pachelbel recede. He gives Hannibal his full attention. He knows Hannibal observed him zoning out. Hannibal expects Will to zone out. Nothing new there.

"Menelaus is watching Agamemnon, probably hoped he would follow, curious to see where that would lead. Whatever you intend with Ruggerio will exonerate me, at least keep me out of a time line."

"Necessary in order for Patroclus to remain among the Greeks. Although, he will have to reveal himself eventually."

"It's better this way, for now."

"Is it? Always wondering which assessment will claim Jack's fancy at any moment. If Menelaus knew for certain Patroclus' heart, anticipating what he might do would be much easier."

"If Menelaus knew? Or Achilles?" Will says, fingers tracing the pattern of the table cloth.

"Or the attending psychiatrist to both Achilles and Patroclus for that matter." Hannibal scoffs. "Does he know your heart?"

"Daniel…is not just blood and breath. He's not fuel."

"You have an imago of him. You must let it go."

"I know."

"You know. But, can you do it?"

"We agreed to clear away the Greek and Trojans." Will sighs.

"So we did. I have image of what Antenor might do. Do you?"

"Locking us in a cage with no food to see which one would kill the other first would take too long. I think he intends to finish what he started."

“I agree, though he may switch things around.”

“He’s counting on whichever one of us he grabs, the other will come after.”

“Agamemnon already has you. You will be the bait.”

“A role I’m not entirely unfamiliar with.”

“I would have to keep an eye on you.”

“Only if you wanted to rescue me.” Will’s fingers cease their tremulous tracing as Will looks up to gaze at Hannibal. The forlorn grin and tousled curls are achingly effective.

“Does Patroclus trust Achilles?” Hannibal says.

“Does Achilles trust Patroclus?”

“Tell me, Will, when we dined in Baltimore, at my home…was I dining with your empathy or was I dining with you?”

“You were always dining with both.”

Hannibal nods, lifts his glass and Will follows suit, each of them drink at the same time, each of them searching the face of the other, memory and existence indistinguishable in the fading sunlight.

Will speaks first, breaking eye contact to resume his exploration of the tablecloth.

“At this point, I could get grabbed by either Trojans or Greeks.”

“You will have to allow it to happen. They may drug you. Or hurt you.”

“They won’t want me to bleed until I’m hanging over the pig pen. You think…”

“They’ll use the old slaughter house. I would. Last place anyone would look.”

“Except Menelaus.”

“Perhaps. Menelaus practices plausible deniability. Agamemnon acts independently. He will be emboldened after today.”

“No cavalry.” Will says.

“When you were at the slaughter house, on the phone, you started to say something. If Patroclus should…what?”

“I was thinking of this very scenario. I was less sure of my intentions then. And yours.”

“And now?”

“I’m feeling very secure right now. Could be the wine…”

Will smiles again. The smile is genuine and meant to be reassuring, but Hannibal is convinced Will intends to take a different path out of his inferno. The cub is still managing his fear, still anticipating regret and all the forms that regret might take. Dubious decisions are bound to ensue. Decisions that have the potential to adversely affect Hannibal. What is to be done about that?

Jack Crawford is managing multiple fronts as he navigates ever closer. Will is also managing multiple fronts. Hannibal does not doubt Will is capable. It is a matter of how he intends to manage them. Uncle Jack and Will may have an uneasy alliance, but Will's empathy leaves him impressionable and vulnerable. And there is Clayton's influence to consider. And Du Maurier's interference.

Hannibal does not expect to learn anything he does not already know about the FBI or Pazzi from Will. Their conversation will provide what their conversations have always provided. A window into Will's fascinating and beautiful mind.

"Achilles would not leave his Patroclus to Antenor's design. Would Patroclus leave Achilles to it?"

"Patroclus put on Achilles' armor with the best intentions. Did Achilles forgive Patroclus for taking up his armor while he slept?"

The timber of Will's voice is tinged with reproach, though the face remains serene. He means to provoke. Will is deflecting his question with a question. Answer enough. Sins of omission are easily detected when one knows what to look for.

"He has." Hannibal returns quickly, eyes level with the blue ones shimmering with accusation. "Did Patroclus forgive himself for the pain his misguided act caused Achilles as he took his last breath upon Hector's spear?"

"Would that be like God forgiving Adam his transgression?" Will pushes off from the table, the tablecloth forgotten, the prop no longer required. "Did God see failure in himself when Adam fell?"

"God created Adam in his own image, a corporeal being constructed of corporeal material perhaps too fragile and delicate to contain the divine." Hannibal manages without sarcasm.

"So, God forgave Adam his failure." Will says, deliberately flippant.

"But, he could not ignore it. Punishment inspires reflection. If we learn our limitations too soon we never learn our power."

Hannibal clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth and finding it suddenly dry, refills his glass. He gestures towards Will's glass and he nods, inching his glass closer. Hannibal watches him study the crystal sparkle like rubies in the sunlight and wonders what thoughts occupy Will's mind at this moment.

Will wonders who punished Hannibal long ago. Who it was who robbed him of his childhood garden and sent him stumbling out into an imperfect world alone armed only with shield and sword to protect the fragile garden in his mind. Satisfying curiosity is entertainment for a being long separated from his garden, alone but safe in his loneliness. He had ventured out of his safe haven, had offered friendship to Will. And because he had tasted friendship he decided that loneliness too great to bear upon returning to his sanctuary, despite Will's transgression.

The creator has accepted his creation's failings, sees his creation as both part of himself but also as a being separate and worthy in his own right. Will considers this is considerable growth in

Hannibal. A tentative and barely conscious awareness of it taps against his skull. He views it as weakness, ergo the anger and the ruthless punishment in Baltimore, but the awareness is there.

Will is as much Hannibal's mentor as Hannibal has been his. Will realizes what a terrible burden that is. Hannibal has experimented with friendship before. Will imagines most of those dalliances ended up on his dinner table. Except one. Well, apparently, two.

"God had his Eve. What happened to her?"

"Have you run into Du Maurier?"

"Not yet. Although Daniel has. She *referred* you to him. For what purpose?"

"Curiosity. I did not know you were associated with him. Not at first."

"He led you to me. I know. When did she know about me?"

"I do not know the answer to that, but I think for quite some time. She is not aware I know of your association with Doctor Clayton."

"Does she suspect?"

"She has been led to believe I think I drew you here with the tableaux. I last spoke to her before the attack in the alley."

"The blonde hairs are hers. You are setting her up for something. How did Eve offend?"

"Bedelia is not, nor ever was, my friend. It is a marriage of convenience."

"With all the fringe benefits, no doubt."

"There are always benefits. Doctor Clayton indulged in some of those benefits."

"What…do you know about that?"

"I know that she is not his friend. Neither is she yours."

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Does that include Daniel? He is not your enemy."

"You form attachments easily. That lovely detective, D'Angelo is it?"

"I'm not forming attachments."

"Cultivating your garden?"

"Eve is apparently still lurking in yours."

"Something like that."

"God banished Adam and Eve from the garden. Both of them fallen from grace."

"God would walk with only one of them again."

"Is Eve aware of that?"

“In so many words.”

“In exactly the same words, most likely. You’ve set us against each other.”

Hannibal has also put Daniel right in the middle of it. Will sighs. Not Hannibal. He has put Daniel right in the middle of all of it.

“What is her end game? Or do you intend to hold the cards close?”

“What do you imagine it is? What other benefit does continued association with her offer, besides the sexual? Ask, what is her nature?”

“Should I run into her, do I know she knows where I live?”

“Should you?” Hannibal says, smacking his lips. “What would you like her to know? You really only need to know one thing about her.”

“She is the viper in the garden.”

"Yes."

“Cultivated a little too much sass in your garden?” Will says raising a brow.

“My garden is sufficiently overflowing with sass.”

Hannibal rises from his chair and begins to collect the empty plates and soiled silverware. He moves slowly and deliberately, allowing Will time to ponder expectations as they transition from dinner to dessert and…afterwards.

Ruggerio can wait until later. Pazzi will have some explaining to do. To his superiors and to the FBI and Interpol. Uncle Jack can feign ignorance and he likely will. Ruggerio was Pazzi’s call; Pazzi's mistake. Jack will question Will and he will throw him back to Pazzi’s corner. Pazzi will cooperate because closer scrutiny will impinge upon his efforts to appease Mason and collect his reward. And Will. Will will have to examine another tableau for Jack.

“More wine, Will? Or would you prefer…”

The doorbell chimes. Will looks toward the hall and back to Hannibal. Hannibal stands still, dishes in either hand, gaze steady ahead.

“Expecting anyone?”

“Not this evening. You?”

“Nope.” Will says emphasis riding on the “p”.

“Most inconvenient.” Hannibal sets the plates back on the table. “I should answer it then.”

“Hannibal…” Will says and stops, realizing he has called out his given name. It feels…natural. An almost imperceptible shift in the air follows as Hannibal turns from the hallway.

Hannibal gaze fixes on lips parted in bewilderment once again, the blinking of eyes and the upward tic of the brows. A spontaneous and impulsive display on Will’s part. Hannibal reads…concern.

Hannibal lifts his head, “I know who it is, Will. You might want to appear a little less friendly. You have appearances to keep.”

Hannibal gestures toward Will’s jacket where his weapon is holstered. Will has not removed it and Hannibal thinks he may have forgotten he was wearing it. Will pats his jacket and nods at Hannibal.

The doorbell chimes again and Hannibal can see a familiar figure pacing through the frosted glass on either side of the oversized hardwood door. He grips the doorknob and opens the door wide enough to convey happy surprise but not so wide that the interior of the house is exposed.

“Hello, Bedelia.”

“Hannibal.” His name is delivered with icy precision.

“Won’t you come in? I wasn’t expecting you.”

Du Maurier steps inside, smoothing her hair and adjusting her posture so that the curves of her perfectly shaped and ample breasts are clearly visible in the snug button down blouse. The skirt is equally snug along the equally perfect and shapely hips.

“You would have been expecting me had you returned my calls.”

“And what did the fact that I didn’t suggest to you? Hmmmm?”

“That you are likely engaged in something ilicit and given current circumstances I thought it in my, our best interest, that I find out what that is. And…” Du Maurier sucks in her breath and runs her fingers around the collar of his shirt. “You did invite me to dinner.”

“So I did. Well, you missed dinner, but you are just in time for dessert.” Hannibal smiles and gestures to the dining room.

“The dining room?”

Du Maurier finds it odd Hannibal taking his meal in the house. He compulsively enjoys his meals, all of them, on the veranda, the view of the garden his singular passion at the villa.

“This evening, yes.” Hannibal halts to allow Du Maurier to walk ahead.

“You don't usually have dessert alone…”

“I’m not alone.” Hannibal calls from behind her.

As Hannibal advances from behind her, Du Maurier crosses beneath the archway. She feels his hands sink into her shoulders as she stares unbelieving at the table. She feels the color drain from her face.

“Hello, Bedelia.” Will says shoving his chair away from the table.

Will Graham has the temerity to stand and offer her a chair in Hannibal’s home. It is then she notices the sleek black gun on the table. Graham’s fingers rest on the table right next to it. She notes the stack of dirty dishes, the remains of the meal, and the nearly empty glasses of wine. She also notes the two empty bottles on the credenza and the half full bottle still on the table. Hannibal is dressed rather casually and Graham's rumpled attire suggests he had some difficulty getting here.

They have clearly just finished dinner and Hannibal must have been clearing it when she rang the bell.

“Mr. Graham. How…curious to find you here.”

“I could say the same about you.” Will says looking to Hannibal.

“We were just about to have dessert. Sardinian seadas. Similar to Roman cheesecake. It has to go in the oven for a few minutes. Please…make yourselves at home.”

Hannibal waits for Bedelia to take her seat, curious where she will sit. She walks slowly around the table, gazing at the remains of their meal with a critical eye and avoiding Will. She finally sinks into the chair at the head of the table rather than sit on either side of one of them. Hannibal would have been surprised if she had taken a seat next to Will and his Berretta. Even more surprised if she had sat next to him.

Will pats his Berretta and smiles at Du Maurier. She looks lovely in her tight pastels and high heels, but the constant stroking of thumb across fingers as she holds her hands in her lap betray her anxiety. Will thinks she is trying to get her bearings. That at least is something they have in common. Will’s smile fades as he remembers that is not all they have in common.

He had wanted Hannibal to explain his association with Du Maurier. Hannibal has done one better. Or worse. As Du Maurier sits eyeing the wine Will thinks of his inferno and the elusive viper that slithers through his dreams.

Hannibal ponders the two beings occupying his garden. One with his hand on his precious weapon of choice, the other with her eyes on her precious drug of choice. Firearms and alcohol often do not mix well. The viper has intuited it is wise not to align herself with either of them at the moment. Hannibal often finds dessert superfluous except on rare occasions. He is reminded of the dinner with Alana and Will. No chocolate mousse this evening, but dessert should prove equally entertaining if not deadly.

Chapter End Notes

The kylix Hannibal uses for his centerpiece is a reproduction of the red-figure kylix in the Berlin Museum found here: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/artifact?name=Berlin+F+2278&object=vase

“One must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star.” Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra.

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, or a hell of heaven.” Milton, Paradise Lost, Book I.

“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / to mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From Darkness to promote me?” Milton, Paradise Lost, Book X.

Ajax and Hector exchange gifts in the Book VII of the Homer’s Iliad.

Will and Hannibal discuss Plato’s Republic Book VII The Cave and Ethics: The Ring of Gyges.

The allusion to the best of all possible worlds is from Voltaire’s Candide.
Mephistopheles flying over Wittenberg, Delacroix, Lithograph 1828
Illustration for Goethe's Faust
Pietro Ricchi, il Lucchesino St. Sebastian. 17thcentury

Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Time for dessert in Hannibal’s Garden of Eden. Will isn’t the only person in the room who is unpredictable this evening. The traumatized are unpredictable because they know they can survive. Bedelia manages to surprise Will...and Hannibal. Jack pays a visit to Daniel in Fiesole when his broken pony doesn’t wander home.

“What…did you give me?” Will wonders how many minutes he has before he passes out and if that is enough time to kill her.

“Bedelia!” Hannibal’s voice rings in his ears. “What…have you done now?”

“What you should have done. Weed your garden.”

Hannibal is suddenly at Will’s side, guiding him back toward his chair. Will twists away from Hannibal’s hands, stumbles into the chair knocking it aside and lunges toward Du Maurier grabbing his Berretta from the table. He releases the safety, hands trembling he aims the gun at the viper, prepared to shoot while he still can.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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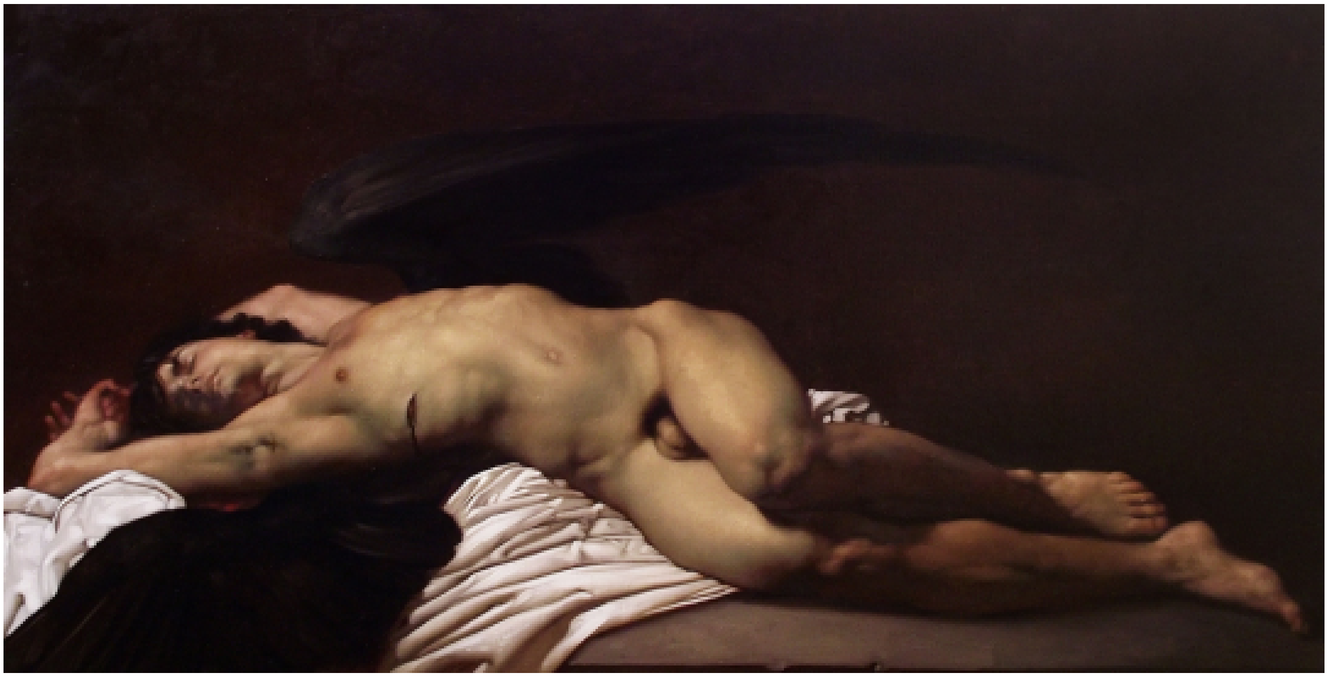

Figlio del Mattino, Roberto Ferri

Who holds the devil, let him hold him well, He hardly will be caught a second time.

Goethe, *Faust, Part I*

The second movement of Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* hums throughout the villa; the *romanze adante* as Du Maurier ponders Hannibal's centerpiece for his dinner with Graham. Hannibal is not subtle. The golden gleam of the sun shrinks from the table to the strains of the sweetly sonorous melody, slivers of light cling like fingertips to the hyacinths as though reluctant to withdraw. An appropriate metaphor, thinks Du Maurier as she glances at Graham, the flesh and blood colored flowers have been cut and though Apollo's reach is long and warm his beloved Hyacinth is all but dead already.

Hannibal does not choose his musical selections without some degree of deliberation and this early evening as the sun sets in Impruneta is no exception. Neither did Du Maurier decide to come here without deliberation. After speaking to Jack Crawford she has determined Hannibal and the Paolini too reckless a variable to see her original agenda through to its conclusion. She has Hannibal's bank code. She has an immunity agreement. Hannibal and Graham are here.

What is it Hannibal always says…a convergence of circumstance?

The touch of Hannibal's fingers upon her shoulders lingers still as she watches him disappear around the corner to administer the finishing flourishes on dessert. A squeeze of encouragement she decides as she feasts her eyes upon the sullen Graham and his gun. Graham must have politely acquiesced to Hannibal's invitation to dinner, even to consuming human flesh with him, but had insisted on keeping his weapon. And, having waited these many months to be close to his obsession once again, in someplace other than an alley, Hannibal had also acquiesced. She senses an uneasy gentleman's agreement between them.

She thinks of the GPS tracker in her purse. Graham has no intention of bringing the FBI here today; his meeting with Hannibal always meant to be a private one. Hannibal is evidently not expecting company. He would not be dining with Graham upon a last supper waiting for the FBI to descend upon them *in flagrante delicto*. But, that is exactly how Crawford will find them.

She had posed the possibility of finding them together to Crawford only hours ago. Graham is not biding his time holding Hannibal captive in his own home waiting for the Polizia, Interpol, and the FBI to arrive, either. The atmosphere is far too relaxed for that. Graham would have his gun in his hand, not setting on the table. No, the gun is merely a symbol of their gentleman's agreement, though she has no doubt the magazine is fully loaded. They are not expecting *any* company. Hannibal had left his front gates open, perhaps to welcome Graham but more likely because Hannibal's capacity for conceit knows no bounds.

"Whimsy." Graham says suddenly.

He tilts his head to one side, his lips part in that alluring way he has and the pale blue eyes seem to pierce right through her. She thinks his madness endows him with an almost ethereal quality. Hannibal must have deplored rending such beauty with his blade. He would no more have sliced into a Rembrandt than mar his precious Graham but slice him he did, and like the Rembrandt there is no means of restoring it to its pristine condition. Hannibal must have felt like he had slammed into concrete when he discovered Graham's deception. Graham's mind may fascinate Hannibal, but there is no denying the beauty of the man. Hannibal is not immune to beauty. Quite the opposite. Hannibal's tastes are the most exquisite of any man she has ever known.

"A curious way to start a conversation, Mr. Graham." The voice is whisper soft like a brush

"And things keep getting curiouser and curiouser."

Will twirls his wine stem between thumb and finger, eyes shifting between the swirling curves of crimson in his glass and Du Maurier's face.

"Whimsy. You said that's how we'd catch him." Will repeats.

Du Maurier rolls her eyes to the ceiling and emits another long suffering sigh. "Still courting Hannibal's muse?" The sapphire eyes roll back to Will.

"I think…I am the one being courted."

Will glances around the room and looks beyond the stucco and curtains to the smoldering vestiges of his inferno and beyond that to verdant slopes, tree lined silhouettes dot the streaming fiery sunset.

"Are you sure?" She purrs.

Will watches her uncoil into the chair though the purse remains perched on her lap. It is not a large bag, but Will suspects the viper has sufficiently stuffed it with her own implements of persuasion. Her intrusion into this private universe disrupts the fragile rhythm he had established with Hannibal, the shift in timbre and tone too stark and too quick to assimilate. Du Maurier's presence grates, it falls like staccato notes upon the sensitive instrument that is his mind completely obliterating the harmony Hannibal had solicited and sustained throughout supper. Will knows he had unwisely allowed that synchronous harmony to play between them again. His dreams and hallucinations have begun to merge with his waking world to the degree that he can't distinguish between the conversations he's had with Hannibal in the past from the ones in his head and even the current ones.

He has talked to the Hannibal in his mind in all his various forms about his dreams. As Hannibal's form has shifted in his dreams; his dreams have shifted into his waking consciousness. His waking world feels no different than his dreamscapes. Even now the creature drifts in the shadows and corners of Hannibal's villa. The flock of ravens roosts around the pool like a thick black blanket. Memory and imagination have become one fluid state of consciousness.

Did he tell Hannibal that Daniel was not breath and blood to him or did he dream that he said that? Has he ever told Hannibal that it is difficult to remember his life before they met? Or was it a fleeting thought streaming through his mind as he had chopped up Luciano? Did he confide to Hannibal that the rooms of his memory palace are filled with Hannibal's house? That more of the rooms within it are structures of Hannibal's design than his own? Did he think those things or say them aloud? Their conversation this afternoon mirrors so many he has had with the Hannibal in his head he is not certain. His mind has fused his imago of Hannibal with the one hovering over the stove in the kitchen and perhaps, they are the same.

Potentially the same… Their worlds collided in Baltimore like the shattered tea cup; they pick up the sharp shards with trembling fingers both afraid the shards may cut more deeply than the shattering.

The viper leans a pale elbow on the arm of the chair to steady her as she intrudes into Will's space at the table and he thinks of her with Daniel, thinks of the creature before him winding and unwinding her limbs around him, slipping scaly appendages between his legs and filling his mouth with her serpent's tongue of lies.

Will imagines killing her. If he were to kill her he thinks he would snap her neck. As he gazes at the immaculately dressed Du Maurier he can see himself grasping her white throat, thumbs grinding beneath her chin and…crack!

"Courting you for what purpose?" She says, "Do you honestly think Hannibal more enamored with you than with himself?"

Will has to smile at the deflection. He wonders if she has ever really talked with Hannibal before. She must think him a novice at this.

"Was it whimsy that got you on the plane with him? Or were you persuaded?" Will says in a tone that reeks of sarcasm.

"Neither. As you pointed out from the other side of the bars Hannibal put you behind, our sense of self is an unavoidable consequence of social ties. I…do not succumb to whimsy."

"Your current social ties seem to suggest more than a passing familiarity with the concept."

"It would appear some social ties are unavoidable, wouldn't you agree? Unlike you, my sense of self has not been compromised by them."

The large sapphire eyes burrow into him and a part of Will wriggles away and retreats under the steady gaze. She intended to pluck a chord with that and she did. Hannibal has apparently discussed him in some detail with his former therapist. She had listened and the wheels in her pretty and perceptive head had spun around and around. They are spinning now. Will thinks of the portfolios leaning against the wall in the living room and wonders if Du Maurier has seen them, or if Hannibal has ever left them out for her as he did for Will. Will doubts any of them contain drawings of Du Maurier.

The thought tickles and Will quickly slams that fort shut. But not before recognizing he can ruffle that cool exterior a bit finding out just how familiar she is with Hannibal's inner universe. How much of it has Hannibal actually allowed her to see?

"You imply a conscious choice to be here…with him. Not persuasion or coercion this time." He says.

"Nothing so simple. I merely imply my sense of self sufficiently…separate from his to know the difference."

"Survival for the traumatized often involves delusion." Will thinks briefly of capture bonding, but closes the gate on that horse. Du Maurier remains in Hannibal's orbit for much more sinister reasons.

"It would appear we can delude ourselves into believing or rationalizing just about anything." Du Maurier says.

She sets her purse on the table and rises from her chair, smooths her skirt and begins to walk around the table, trailing long French manicured nails along the tablecloth. Graham's gloomy gaze follows her across the room to the tall curio cabinet where Hannibal keeps his stemware. She selects a cut crystal goblet and realizing she has no place setting, pulls silverware and a satin napkin from the middle drawer and returns to the table. After she has filled her glass she offers the bottle to Graham. He declines.

Will shakes his head at the bottle she dangles from her hand as she shrugs and begins to read the label. He is plenty buzzed as it is. He should have stopped drinking wine at least an hour ago. The thought of trudging back to the stolen car in the dark drunk is not how he imagined leaving this evening. Of all the possible outcomes he had imagined, Du Maurier showing up had not been one of them. The sconces lit along the wall are flaming indications of Hannibal's…hopes. Du Maurier's arrival has now shifted the possible outcomes into an arena Will had not prepared to do battle in this evening.

And she is far more familiar with Hannibal's home here than he is. A point she continues to make with the insistent caressing of objects and furniture, rubbing her scent into everything. She has been Hannibal's sole confident for the past year and she is remarking her territory. Or, she is at least attempting to make Will think that. What does Hannibal want him to see?

This is, of course, just the sort of convergence of circumstances Hannibal revels in. Hannibal, and to some extent Du Maurier, both view this turn of events as an opportunity. Curiosity, like appetite has been whetted and once engaged, Hannibal's need to satiate his will be relentless. Du Maurier is likely just as relentless. She has survived this long with him. Will has been drawn into whatever this game is between them, his presence adding an entirely new and provocative element.

He needs to get out of here. Before things become unmanageably insane. He slips his hand into his jacket and cradles the phone in his palm. The knife Hannibal gave him rests beside it, the handle brushing against skin, reminding him of their truce this evening. He glances into the living room. His belt still sits on the stack of drawings where Hannibal had left it. The truce was for the duration of dinner and Hannibal is most literal in his interpretations and his speech.

"Was it whimsy to engage the FBI? Believing himself more cunning than the FBI?" Will says.

“He was. More cunning than even you. You seduced him, Mr. Graham. Offered the one thing he could not resist. Friendship. Then you took it away but only after you had cost him his life in Baltimore.”

“And when you couldn’t persuade him to abandon his therapy with me, you tried to persuade me to stop it.”

The sapphire eyes crease with a practiced patience of the sort a parent extends to a child, or a therapist to a patient. She nods slowly.

“You are, both of you, stubborn to the last. When it became apparent that disaster was imminent; I left.”

“But you didn’t really leave. You let Jack find you.” Will pauses and Du Maurier nods. “Did you know what Hannibal was planning?”

“That he run away with you and the girl? Not until later. I only knew that Hannibal intended to manipulate your release from Baltimore State Hospital, and it was clear to me that should he be successful that I would be drawn into it”

“You manipulated from the sidelines, prepared a path for his escape, and…” Will pauses for emphasis, delivers the rest with just the right note of petulance he knows will appeal to her vanity, “…provided what? Emotional support?”

Du Maurier fairly purrs with delight. “You had caught him. But he had also caught you. You are his greatest accomplishment and his greatest mistake.”

“I think I’ve just been insulted.”

“In your case, the therapist knew his patient better than he knew himself.”

“What’s your excuse?”

“My awareness of Hannibal’s influence was never clouded by…emotional attachment.”

Will thinks that the most honest thing she has said so far. Du Maurier’s singular attachment at the moment seems to be to the wine bottle in front of her. Will can empathize with her need to self-medicate. Will is certain his frequent hospital stays over the past two years are the only thing that stopped a descent into full blown alcoholism.

“No, a generalized detachment seems to be your particular um…malady.” Will says.

“My malady does have the benefit keeping me from being nearly eviscerated. We are the victims of trauma Mr. Graham. We each survive as best we can. At least, most of us. Did you come here to kill or be killed?”

“This isn’t a jungle, Bedelia. This…is just dinner.”

“Neither of you *just* sits down to dinner. Two predators were dining, now there are three.”

Will almost laughs out loud. He understands Hannibal’s alliance with her and to some extent his attraction to her. She is every bit as twisted and malevolent as he is. But she is mistaken. There are only two predators. Du Maurier does not hunt, she scavenges. She steals. She stimulates. And she is up to something.

“You think I came here to kill him?” Will asks, incredulous if only because a cursory glance around the dining room would indicate anything but.

“Didn’t you?” Du Maurier glances at the gun.

“No. Not today.” Will says, “But that may change.”

He glances up at Boucher’s *Leda and the Swan* and wonders if Du Maurier is aware of Hannibal’s reinterpretation of that particular myth. It hangs behind Hannibal’s chair so that Will has been able to see it the entire meal. Hannibal has not mentioned it once, but apparently knowing that it would become part of Will’s consciousness was enough. Hannibal’s logic is not linear; it is serpentine and circuitous – every act connected like the fanning of ripples from pebbles dropped in the pond. Hannibal’s pond is full of the past. His own has become inextricably linked to the literary past that provided him an escape from the traumas of his childhood and it became a framework from which to build his epic mythical universe. Every story has its end. What ending has Hannibal written for Du Maurier? What has he allowed her to infer from a mythos she would ridicule if she dared? She but plays along as he had done to advance her own agenda toward an endgame with Hannibal Will cannot quite grasp.

“Everything changes. Betrayal inflicts a very deep wound. It is too weighty an offense to be forgiven; too terrible a wound to be lifted by a singular act of contrition…or punishment.”

Du Maurier shifts her gaze from the face that has haunted her in countless ways, in the countless charcoal sketches she sees scattered at Hannibal’s desk in the living room. She leans forward after scrutinizing the figures on the kylix and pushes the stems bearing tiny flowers aside to reveal the seated warriors. She rolls her eyes slowly to meet Graham’s indulgent long suffering stare.

“He may be fascinated with you; but you are just as fascinated with him. This…must be incredibly flattering.”

Will rewards the comment with a wan smile. “I am quite beyond…flattery. Either affected by it or condescending to using it.”

“Really. I think you came to assess the extent of your achievement”.

Will chuckles and flicks away a couple crumbs dismissively, brushing off Du Maurier’s assertion with a sneer.

“*My* achievement? How does one even allocate responsibility at this point?”

Every person has an intrinsic responsibility for their own life, Hannibal. No one else can take on that responsibility. Not even you.

Did you take responsibility when you were attacked by your patient?

Yes. But I don't take responsibility for his death.

Nor should you.

“I imagine someone like you feels a near suffocating responsibility for what happened.”

“Someone like me?”

The words sting, his own words thrown back in his face and landing with marked ferocity, especially coming from her. He watches the sleek black viper slither along the floor at Du Maurier’s feet to disappear into the dark beneath the table. Will curls his feet under his chair and tries not to fidget, forcing his focus to remain on Du Maurier and not the hallucination under the table.

“Your gift allows you to understand anyone, doesn’t it? You feel your own sense of responsibility and the weight of everyone else’s.”

“Only if that sense of responsibility were *actually* present.” Will says.

Du Maurier traces her finger over the stylized red faces of the seated warriors. “You must feel some sense of satisfaction, then. Surely you are as capable of feeling that as…contempt.” The claw retracts and she smiles into her glass.

“Contempt *would* be a more…accurate characterization of my feelings at the moment.” Will smiles back.

Will is aware that Hannibal is listening to them express their mutual contempt across the table. Du Maurier knows it too; she nurses her anger like she nurses the glass of ruby red wine she warms in her palms. She does not want to be here, she has to be. She would have fled this time except Hannibal’s actions and the FBI is preventing her.

“Does Jack know you are in Florence?”

“Would Agent Crawford tell you if he did?”

Will may as well keep a stack of chips next to his Berretta. This feels like a game of poker. It occurs to Will that Hannibal’s relationship with Du Maurier is a cold war. A construction of checks and balances. Will thinks Hannibal’s actions have upset the balance of the scales. She remains to correct the balance somehow. Whatever that corrective check is; it is the same thing that compels her complicity.

Associations reach through his consciousness like a beam of light from that distant star of friendship. This sad construction of checks and balances has been tolerated in lieu of an actual relationship. Hannibal has walked through the world accepting Du Maurier as an approximation of the friendships he has experienced only vicariously through others, like his patients. Shades of intimacy with Alana and a twisted sort of respect for Jack. As conceited and egotistical as Hannibal is, he had come to recognize the qualities that define friendship and the absence of them in Du Maurier.

But Hannibal remains an intelligent psychopath. The requisite qualities he identifies are absent in himself. He met Will. For the first time the dream of friendship appeared attainable.

Our conversations, Will, were only ever about you opening your eyes to the truth of who you are.

I want you to believe in the best of me, just as I believe in the best of you.

Even as Will had sat in his cell telling Hannibal how far from friendship they were, to Hannibal, the light from those million miles had seemed a hell of a lot closer than the light from Du Maurier.

Again, Hannibal has shown him the negative so he could see the positive.

"Have you given Jack a reason not to tell me? Like before?"

"I would wager you give him enough reason all by yourself, Mr. Graham."

The graceful notes of Beethoven's *Pastorol* follows the Mozart selection as Apollo's glare at last retreats from the table to steal across floors covered in carpets of red and gold. *Pastorol* is known as the shepherd's hymn of gratitude after the storm, the final movement of the deaf maestro's *Symphony No. 6*, and Du Maurier has to admit that on this particular evening, the piece perfectly complements the departure of the sun. Hannibal harbors hope the shepherd's storm has also departed Graham's heart.

Ironic then that Hannibal is deaf to the rhythms of Graham's heart strings. Hannibal resurrects the past here in this shrine to no avail. Graham will never forgive. For all the hearts and flowers Hannibal has thrown at him, Du Maurier senses no spirit of thanksgiving from Graham as he sits pressed against the back of his chair, fingers splayed on the table in plain sight, an obvious invitation for Du Maurier to do the same.

Graham can advocate for transparency as much as he likes. Du Maurier will not be moved by the soulful blue eyes or the curve of soft lips that seem perpetually moist and supple. She thinks briefly of Clayton in his moment of ecstasy before succumbing to the effects of her cocktail as she gazes at Graham. Imagining that look upon Graham's face is not difficult and neither is imagining Hannibal's response.

Evidence of that manifests each time Hannibal has crossed the kitchen visible through the archway to glance into the dining room. His eyes have not engaged hers even once; with every pass across the archway they alight solely on the disheveled tangle of curls and pensive profile sitting to her right.

Du Maurier looks into the living room at Hannibal's desk and drawings and wonders what Graham truly thinks about when he looks upon sketch after sketch of himself. Surely Graham recognizes obsession when he sees it. Yet there he sits insisting he is beyond flattery. Both of them obsessed and both of them in denial of their mutual obsession. Du Maurier drinks again from a glass that can never be full enough. She thinks she will not know how to behave when she finally reaches Provence and takes control of her life again.

Will notices the darkening of the dining room seems to coincide with the change of music and wonders that he seems to associate the piece with light. He recognizes Beethoven's *Allegreto* from his *Symphony No. 6* and remembers hearing it the morning after killing Tier. The morning he had awakened in Hannibal's bed for the first time. This had been one of the selections Hannibal had played as they had eaten breakfast before joining Jack at the museum. They had been late, had made Jack wait and not because of breakfast…

Will clears his throat and with a shake of his head dismisses the memory to focus on Du Maurier. If he looks at her long enough, the shades of ravens in the yard blend with the roses and he doesn't notice them so much.

Du Maurier dips her nose into her glass and rolls her head toward Will. "Hannibal once told me he wanted to contain your madness like an oil spill. I suggested he was more fascinated with the madness than the man, his patient. He disagreed. How does that make you feel?"

Will shrugs, frowns, stares at nothing for moment. He lifts his eyes to hers and ignoring the malice behind her question, offers her an honest answer. “Vindicated. How does it make you feel?”

If his agenda with Crawford remains as it was before, then your interference will prove that. Your opportunity to be vindicated, my dear.

You present an irresistible challenge.

And if Will were to embrace his nature, would you welcome him with a similar embrace?

That…presents an entirely different challenge.

“Madness is apparently underrated and undervalued.” She nods at the kylix, turns her face away from Will and assumes a vigil like pose, wine glass in hand.

Will wonders if she was crazy before she met Hannibal or because of Hannibal. Will finds himself entertaining the various forms in which Du Maurier could make her way to Hannibal’s table as the entrée. He imagines Hannibal has given the prospect considerable thought.

“Why have you come here, tonight of all nights?” Will asks, drawing her gaze from the red-figured warriors.

“I was invited to dinner.”

Du Maurier watches the tongue dart between pretty pink lips as Graham considers a retort. Graham opens his lips just so, clearly editing his words but the constant licking and parting of them is provocative to say the least. He touches his fingers to his mouth, drags them slowly over lips as he thinks, just like Clayton. She shakes her head as she becomes aware there are words coming out of Graham’s mouth.

“Hummmmm?”

“I said, seems to me you got the days mixed up.”

“You are welcome to that interpretation. Hannibal has made it abundantly clear he would like both of us to sit at his table.”

“And he told me there’s only room for one…at the table so to speak.”

“He told me something similar.”

“Words spoken before recent developments. Plenty of room at the table. And elsewhere.”

Hannibal’s voice precedes him as he emerges from the kitchen bearing dessert. He pauses to observe cub and viper from the archway. No fangs or fur flying yet. What is to be done about that?

Du Maurier disengages her nose from her wine glass to observe Hannibal enter with three plates of dessert, two balanced on one arm as he sets down a plate with the other at his chair first. He is positively in his element Du Maurier thinks. Graham straightens up, alert and almost smiling as fingers quickly find his mouth to stroke at stubble and massage the pliant lips he cannot stop touching. His eyes shift briefly to her and with that one glance the fingers drop to the table along with his gaze. He stares at the tablecloth seemingly annoyed. The two of them do deserve each another.

She closes weary eyes as Hannibal sets down the delicately painted china containing a singular round pastry smothered in a glaze of honey. It smells delicious.

If you would be a swan, then let me see the swan, know the swan. My bed has room for only one other, Bedelia.

Du Maurier opens her eyes to examine the honey coated confection before her. She glances down the sconce lined hallway and smiles wickedly at Hannibal.

“Elsewhere?” She asks and Hannibal lifts a brow in answer.

“Like the garden.” Will says, casting a cutting glance Du Maurier’s direction.

Graham’s voice punctures the moment with all the finesse of an ice pick. Although this *competition* with Graham is purely fiction for everyone but Hannibal, she finds it difficult to frame it academically. Graham is simply…infuriating. And Hannibal’s inflated ego is about to burst.

Hannibal thinks Will is enjoying this encounter more than he had thought he would. Du Maurier frowns and gulps more wine, glances at the Boucher, and decides staring straight ahead is about all she can manage for the next minute or so.

Hannibal lifts his head as though considering the change of metaphor. He offers a tight smile to both Du Maurier and Will. Du Maurier sits as rigid as a rock; her eyes blink cold blue ice. Already testy and she just sat down. Will does have that effect on people.

“Not this garden. Florence has become too small.” Hannibal says.

Du Maurier places her purse back beneath the table on her lap as Hannibal walks the last plate over to Graham.

Graham angles his head to the left side so Hannibal can set a plate in front of him from the right but his hand remains an inch from his gun and his eyes remain fixed on Du Maurier, observing and assimilating. The thought occurs that Agent Crawford may actually be smarter than she has given him credit for. Crawford understands Hannibal’s whimsy. By setting both she and Graham on Hannibal he guarantees Hannibal’s immense ego will be seduced by the attention, unable to resist proving he is the smartest person in the room. Crawford also receives the added bonus of learning where Graham’s loyalties truly lie.

She suspects those loyalties would lie in Hannibal’s bed had she not crashed this superbly revealing repast. Graham appears to be following the same script as before. With one significant difference. His target is no longer his therapist. Graham has found an effective counter to Hannibal’s influence in Clayton. And Hannibal has no idea…

While the boys all play this charade to the end, Du Maurier will slip away to Switzerland. She sips again at the piquant vintage and thinks their meal must have been incredibly rich and saturated in seasoning for Hannibal to select such a full bodied wine. Her nose wrinkles with the scent of decay. The odor seems to be coming from the table. She notices the dome of glass and what must be cheese underneath judging by the rind. Curious, she reaches across the table and lifts the lid.

The smell, not to mention the sight of the writhing white worms thoroughly disgusts and she drops the lid. The lid clinks against the plate loudly, more loudly than she had intended. The smell of the cheese rivals even the moldiest of Roquefort cheeses, including Stilton.

“Casu marzu, a Sardinian delicacy. Too fermented to complement the dessert I’m afraid.” Hannibal says.

Du Maurier looks to Graham who frowns in mock apology on cue. She is not surprised Graham indulged Hannibal’s penchant for the grotesque. Of course he ate some.

Du Maurier raises a brow. “Thankfully. I would have passed regardless.”

She observes the glazed dessert in front of her. The rank cheese that has no place on a proper dining table is but a glimpse of what future meals with the two of them might be like in a world that will never be. Visions of sitting between them as she is now, watching them dare each other to dine on progressively more disgustingly depraved delicacies. One shudders at the thought. They are so alike it is almost sobering…

“Sardinian seadas.” Hannibal is saying, “Filled with a generous helping of grappa, the zest of oranges and lemons and Fiore Sardo cheese. This cheese is not aged, so there is a hint of caramel and fruit and it retains its soft pliant texture. Aging hardens it, and the flavor becomes sharp and unyielding on the tongue.”

Hannibal eases into his chair and snaps his napkin with flourish before arranging it over his knees. He picks up his fork. “Warm and served with honey…this should yield to your tongue.”

It does of course. The crisp flaky fritter dissolves on contact releasing the cheese and citrus to slide luscious and warm around the mouth. Even Du Maurier is momentarily lost and Will has to grin when she moans spontaneously with delight. A quick glance at Hannibal across the table finds him similarly amused. Shades of the dinner with Alana pass between them.

Du Maurier looks up immediately self-conscious and sets down her fork. She reaches for her napkin and dabs at her lips.

“You have outdone yourself with this.” Du Maurier says, “I think you missed your true calling, Hannibal.”

Hannibal beams from his chair, inclines his head graciously accepting the praise. The dessert had been selected with Will in mind. Another metaphor embedded in the meal, an expression of unspoken hope that like the dessert neither had become inflexible, obdurate with the passage of time. Another nod to the melody that had played in happier moments. He looks at Will.

Will shrugs and lowers his eyes. Memories erupt freely, unexpectedly of cold dawn and warm bed, chilly kitchen and hot confections served with roasted coffee, stolen moments from a time when he had felt contentment. A sense of belonging and acceptance had bloomed as though Hannibal had reached across the table on those mornings and had touched his mind. He feels a similar caress now, and for a moment, there is no one in the room but Hannibal.

“It’s perfect.” He says simply, eyes down as he takes another bite.

Hannibal waits for the pale blue eyes to look up again. They do eventually and the affectionate flicker he both remembers and loves greets him. Fleeting as the flicker is, the wound winces inside as hope and happiness collide with the ever present prickle of distrust. Hannibal wonders if Will is right, if this is the best of possible worlds for him and Will; if he can ever look upon that face without doubt smothering the flames of happiness to ashes. Will’s deceit and his anger cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect. They were counter actions to feelings never before experienced by either of them, different responses to identical stimuli.

Will had fled from weakness and Hannibal had lashed out at it. Each of them had fallen into patterns familiar to them, their universe still too new to absorb the shock of its creation. The universe is more comfortable now. Hannibal is more patient. Is the cub less afraid?

Du Maurier watches the exchange between them fascinated by the dance and mystified that they continue it knowing full well that to continue means their mutual destruction.

Will sets down his fork and pushes away from the table a little to break the seductive spell the dessert seems to have cast.

“He’s cultivating his garden, you know.” Will says to Du Maurier.

“Tending. I am tending my garden, Will.”

“Tending or pruning?” Will teases for Du Maurier’s benefit.

“Weeding.” Du Maurier interjects, swallowing a mouthful of the honey glazed confection.

“Pruning is necessary from time to time for the health of the garden. Weeding is removing. One has to correctly identify a weed particularly if it bears flowers.” Hannibal says, fork suspended like the conductor’s baton it is.

“Are you a weed, Mr. Graham?”

“A weed is a plant like any other. It just pops up where you least expect it.”

“All the more reason to tend one’s garden. Too many weeds will choke a healthy garden.” Hannibal says.

“Like a plague.” Du Maurier adds quickly.

The droll sweep of Will’s eyes over Du Maurier’s petite frame is countered with a sultry pucker of her lips. Hannibal swallows another delightful forkful of dessert and waits.

“That would be blight.” Will returns. “And weeds are often immune to blight. In fact, they thrive.”

The tone is identical to the one she hears often from Hannibal’s mouth and delivered with a similar disdain masking as elucidation. Du Maurier marvels that Graham provokes in her the same impulse as Hannibal to smack the charmingly smug look from his face.

“There are remedies for blight. The better part of prevention is knowing what the threat looks like. How is Agent Crawford?” Hannibal says, looking to Will while Du Maurier pushes pastry around her plate.

“He’s back in the saddle after burying Bella. Grieving is a process.”

“So it is. I was sorry to learn of Bella’s passing. Did you attend the funeral?”

“No…” Will’s voice trails off, bitter tasting memories and associations causing a momentary short circuit he quickly corrects. “The timing wasn’t… I didn’t need to be there. Jack…didn’t need me to be there.”

Hannibal nods, takes a breath and exhales. Bella had died before Jack had fully recovered from his wounds. The one Hannibal dealt him and the emotional wound left bare by Will’s inaction. He thinks Uncle Jack still smarting from both.

“And the investigation into the tableaux and the other two?” Hannibal inquires.

“Like I said, forensic evidence is still being processed on the twins. A double murder of this caliber takes time to process. I am facing charges for the Paolini I killed and you…well, it’s just icing on the cake.”

Hannibal’s lips twist slightly. The icing on the cake is yet to come. He turns to Du Maurier.

“What has Jack said to you? That is why you came to dinner this evening, isn’t it?”

Du Maurier takes a long drink from her glass, wonders what Hannibal is up to now.

“So you’ve been talking to Jack.” Will says, leaning back in his chair favoring Du Maurier with a beatific smile upon his face. “For how
long?”

Du Maurier ignores Graham and glares at Hannibal. Graham likely learned she was in Florence because of Clayton. Clayton must have recognized his patient by now. They would both have to be dense not to connect Dumont to her. Curious. Graham is likely sitting on this information, certainly not informing Crawford. But Graham did not need to know she was in contact with Crawford. If Hannibal has a good reason for disclosing this he had better make it clear and quickly.

“Come now, Bedelia. Will has been forthcoming. He deserves to know what Agent Crawford keeps from him.”

Du Maurier crosses her legs and turns to Graham. The perpetual sullen expression he wears when he is not goading her is beginning to wear thin. So is the constant exchange of glances with Hannibal.

“Forgive the blatant forwardness, but…as I understand it, Hannibal nearly fatally wounded you in Baltimore. How is it possible…”

“That I’m in the same room with him?”

“And…sharing a meal, the meat most rare and no mystery to you. There were rumors of a complete mental breakdown.”

“Rumors of my mental incapacitation are greatly exaggerated.”

“Will is exceptionally resilient. And…tenacious.”

“Hannibal opens his arms to the prodigal son.”

Will rests his elbows on the table, gestures wide at Hannibal across the table. Hannibal looks back to Du Maurier.

“Well, you’ll forgive me if my arms are not quite as open.”

“Bedelia has cautioned me repeatedly about you, Will.”

“And you continue to ignore me.” Du Maurier scoffs.

It is somehow reaffirming to know Hannibal ignores his therapist. Will cuts into the pastry with his fork and lifts another warm mouthful to his lips.

“If I always listened, Bedelia, what would we talk about?” Hannibal says with a quick wink.

“I really can’t imagine…” Du Maurier’s expression does not change.

Will wipes his mouth, “You talked to Jack, today?”

“I did.”

“Then you know about the Paolini?”

“She does.” Hannibal answers for her.

“The situation with the Paolini is a problem.” Will says.

“A problem we can solve together. It is in our mutual interest to work together.” Hannibal says.

“At least for the duration of the problem. We reserve the right to kill each other…” Will lifts his glass to Hannibal.

“The pleasure belongs to no one else.” Hannibal lifts his glass to Will and drinks. “Thoughts Bedelia?”

“It would appear your therapy was more successful than I have been led to believe. *Salute e lunga vita.*” Bedelia raises her glass and lifts it once before attaching the goblet to her lips again.

“*A tutti noi*.” Hannibal looks around the table.

“Not likely. So…about Jack?” Will prompts.

Beethoven’s *Eroica* hums and the aroma of the warm and melting dessert fills the room. Will’s scent wafts across the table feral and sweaty, overpowering the lighter floral scent of the fading hyacinths and Du Maurier’s signature Christian Dior. Hannibal has observed them separately, acutely analyzing every expression. To watch them together is fascinating.

Du Maurier slides her fingers along the polished silver of the fork and lifts frosty sapphire eyes to the glistening pale blue ones. Hannibal swallows another mouthful of crust and filling slowly, his senses so stimulated the feeling is almost euphoric.

“It was Hannibal’s idea to contact him, not mine. Agent Crawford would like to believe I am still under Hannibal’s influence, possibly in distress. I have cultivated that belief in the pursuit of information otherwise unavailable…until now?”

Du Maurier’s sapphire eyes turn to Hannibal and sapphire becomes flint as tapered fingers caress crystal.

“Which means Jack doesn’t trust you, Will.”

“That…would be nothing new. He doesn’t trust you either, Bedelia. Nobody trusts anybody. I wonder why.” Will stretches his legs beneath the table and eases his back into his chair, eyes fixing first on Bedelia, then Hannibal.

Du Maurier’s thoughts roll. Agitation balloons like blisters beneath her blouse. Hannibal is exposing her advantage to Graham for no reason she can fathom. Unless he expects a little quid pro quo from Graham at her expense. Two can play at that game. Du Maurier has a much more direct approach in mind for Graham.

“Jack is desperate to catch me. He will use whatever means he can to do so. He will play you against each other, has been all along.”

Hannibal pauses as both Du Maurier and Will glare at him. Hannibal allows himself a small smile. “I can’t say I blame him. Now that you are aware of each other, Jack’s position has been weakened, considerably.”

Will sighs and turns to Du Maurier. “No need to let on I know about you, Bedelia.” Will says.

“Nor I, you.” Bedelia agrees.

Preserving the status quo with Jack in the wake of Du Maurier’s surprise visit is paramount. The longer Jack remains in the dark about Du Maurier’s association with Daniel the better. Daniel’s integrity is crucial, at least his perceived integrity. Will swallows down the guilt that pools metallic on his tongue. He almost shoves the plate away as Pachelbel’s *Canon in D* queues up. He glances at Hannibal. Hannibal’s attentions are focused on Du Maurier. He thinks for a moment he may be imagining the melody. The hauntingly sweet piece evokes associations of both Hannibal and Daniel, of harpsichord and piano, of Baltimore and Fiesole. But Hannibal is not aware of his associations with Daniel. How could he?

The sensation of sinking in quicksand pervades and the need to retreat is becoming unbearable. The glances exchanged between Du Maurier and Hannibal may be contrived for his benefit or genuine. Instinct tells him to leave and live to fight another day.

“How did you find Hannibal?”

“I found him in his garden.” Will smiles.

“I meant…”

“I know what you meant. Why should I tell you that? I haven’t even told him.”

“He didn’t just jot down his address for you after you sliced up the Paolini together? He didn’t leave you a map in the tableaux?” Du Maurier says.

“Oh, he left little messages between the splatter and the body parts.” Will purses his lips together, nodding as he speaks, “But he didn’t make it easy.”

“No fun in that.” Hannibal agrees.

“I didn’t put it together until today.” Will says gesturing about the dining room.

“I can’t tell him everything.” Hannibal looks into Du Maurier’s pinched face.

Du Maurier certainly hopes not. Hannibal is enjoying himself immensely. Even the dismal Graham has become more animated.

“And I do wonder what else you have or have not told each other. Or, what you are not telling me.”

“Sins of omission have a habit of catching up to us, don’t they, Will?”

“They certainly do. Still preferable to outright lies.”

“I concur.” Hannibal says. “Perhaps if you asked Will something that requires either a yes or no response.”

“I’m not playing twenty questions.” Will grumbles.

“Bedelia, Will has been grieving losses and reevaluating for the past year. As have I. You are aware of my thoughts on many things including Will. Recent events have provided enough reason to begin a new conversation.”

“Are you having conversations or has Mr. Graham resumed his therapy? Again.”

Du Maurier tosses her blonde tresses and stares pointedly at Will. Hannibal watches as the viper’s fangs appear and he waits with coiled anticipation to see what his precious cub will do with her.

“Neither of you are practicing psychiatrists. I don’t need another therapist.” Will says, choosing his words carefully.

“Another therapist? You are currently seeing a psychiatrist?” Hannibal asks.

Will looks from Hannibal to Du Maurier. Both their faces are as blank as an empty page but both sets of eyes glitter with expectation. Du Maurier waits eager to ascertain whether or not Hannibal knows; and Hannibal, eager to search her impassive face for a glint of gloat.

“A condition of working with Jack. I wasn’t allowed to be in Italy otherwise. Too unstable.”

A wounded and bitter smile accompanies Will’s words. He reads approval in Hannibal’s luminous eyes. Du Maurier relaxes her stiff posture almost imperceptibly and her face remains the doll like mask it always is but for the subtle twitching of lips on her left. An involuntary tell that Hannibal seated to her left has no doubt noticed. Du Maurier glances over at Hannibal, a side long glancing that bounces off him and back to Will. On cue Hannibal clears his throat.

“Agent Crawford has to operate by the book.” Hannibal says.

“A book he threw out the window before.” Du Maurier reminds him. As though anyone needed clarification on Jack’s methods.

“A book not so easily tossed this time I imagine. How do you find your therapy?”

“It has its benefits.”

Will again shifts his eyes between Hannibal and Du Maurier. He can imagine Du Maurier’s tongue poking restlessly around her mouth at his remark. Hannibal is unreadable but the creases around Du Maurier’s eyes deepen as she looks into his face. Will holds her gaze. Messages exchanged and received.

She doesn't want Hannibal to know about his association with Daniel and now she believes he does not. She believes Will wants to keep it from him as well. Hannibal is now aware she desires to keep this information from him. Perfect.

"Therapy is only effective when the patient is receptive." Du Maurier says, unable to resist prodding him.

"Receptiveness is generally commensurate with trust. I have what you could call a generalized distrust issue…with therapists."

"I don't believe effectiveness is Agent Crawford's concern." Hannibal says.

"No, I imagine not." Du Maurier says. "How would you characterize your relationship with Agent Crawford?"

"How would you characterize yours?" Will responds.

"Will is here under a flag of truce, Bedelia. Just getting reacquainted."

"And are you…reacquainted?" Du Maurier prompts.

"I'll be in a better position to determine that…after you leave. You interrupted our… reacquainting." Will says.

Hannibal lifts a brow. Not the response he expected from Will. Still deliciously unpredictable. He looks to Du Maurier. The exasperated frown is predictable and gratifying.

"My thoughts are not tasty enough for you?" Du Maurier says.

"What makes you think it's your thoughts I'd like to taste?"

"Your performance this afternoon almost persuades, Mr. Graham." comes the flat retort.

"Oh, I think you would take all the awards for performances, Bedelia. My agenda is with Hannibal; not you. Stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours. Tell Jack whatever you like. Tell Hannibal whatever you like. But don't…pretend you say anything to me that hasn't been carefully prepared and prepackaged for easy digestion."

"Will's palate is much more refined these days, Bedelia."

Bedelia lifts her glass, manicured nails click against the crystal emitting a low pitched chime. Her glass is all but empty and she tosses down the remaining gulp and wipes her hand across darkly stained lips. She has heard enough. Hannibal sits entranced with Graham's every move, every word. Graham may have penetrated Hannibal's defenses more deeply than she had thought possible.

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford.

Each of them is lonely, Agent Crawford, in their own way. They understand each other. Who among us does not desire to be understood? Which of us would not be seduced by that kind of acceptance?

With the Paolini and Verger circling close, Du Maurier thinks she should deliver Hannibal to Jack Crawford sooner rather than later. If the Paolini do manage to capture Hannibal or both of them, her immunity agreement is worthless and Crawford will bring her in on conspiracy and any number of other charges the FBI can hurl at her.

Offering her services to Verger is equally unthinkable. He can't be trusted and she doesn't need the money. She decides to make her move.

"If…I haven't overstayed my welcome, Hannibal, would you be opposed to opening another bottle of wine? Seems a shame to leave your cellar to the FBI once again."

"It would be a shame. I find I am always managing expectations where Will is concerned. Another bottle of the same?"

"Perhaps something a little less robust with dessert."

"A bottle of white with dessert, then?" Hannibal rises from his chair, "I'll be right back. Try not to antagonize one another."

Hannibal waves a finger and offers a bemused smile to Will and to Du Maurier before retiring to the kitchen. Hannibal knows the viper prefers to strike while his back is turned. Time to for the cub to tangle with the viper.

Du Maurier stands up with her purse and turns to the curio cabinet. Will wonders if she is brazen enough to carry the purse to the cabinet. She does not. In fact, she does not hold the purse in her hands long at all. Will wonders how she might manage slipping something similar to what she slipped Daniel in his wine.

"We'll need fresh glasses for the white." Du Maurier says, slipping the purse onto the table before walking to the curio.

She opens the panes wide and examines the assortment of glasses before choosing the appropriate stemware. She returns to the table and sets the glasses down together at her end of the table. Will watches her take up the used glasses from the table, pausing beside him to collect his glass from the right.

Will nods in acknowledgment as she removes it and carries all three glasses to the dry sink. She is as proper as Hannibal he thinks as she returns to the table and quickly polishes the rims of the elegant crystal with satin cloth. European service dictates serving and removing courses from the right with few exceptions. Du Maurier is well versed in table settings and manners and apparently fastidious about their implementation.

Du Maurier sets a fresh glass before Hannibal's place setting, sets another at hers and advances toward Will. Will thinks Hannibal equally fastidious and finds it odd that he had not opened a bottle of white to accompany the citrusy dessert. Associations come quickly. Hannibal had not been remiss at all. He was communicating something. To him? Or to Du Maurier? He looks up as she sets the long tapered glass down…to his left.

The smell of rust and rot descends, permeates his nostrils. Blackened scales erupt from swaying hips, and her heels hit the carpet with a hiss. The vicious viper of his inferno comes bearing gifts…

He listens to the soft swish of fabric behind his chair; feels the pin prick of alarm as fingers faintly fluff his hair to slide along his neck as she crosses to his right. He turns his head quickly to protest, and his right arm comes up instinctively to make contact with…nothing. He is vaguely aware of

Hannibal appearing in the archway as he feels the sting of a syringe breaking skin of his left shoulder; it plunges deep into muscle, depresses with a burn.

He shifts in his chair, turns, grabs for the hand still grasping the syringe. Du Maurier steps back, remarkably quickly for someone wearing heels.

Will pulls the dangling syringe from his shoulder, tearing skin and the torn fabric begins to stain red. He moves toward Du Maurier as the floor tilts up and the hum of cicadas echoes in waves, one sweeping chorus after another. De Maurier's heels dance gingerly across the carpet unaffected by the rocking floor.

"What…did you give me?" Will wonders how many minutes he has before he passes out and if that is enough time to kill her.

"Bedelia!" Hannibal's voice rings in his ears. "What…have you done now?"

"What you should have done. Weed your garden."

Hannibal is suddenly at Will's side, guiding him back toward his chair. Will twists away from Hannibal's hands, stumbles into the chair knocking it aside and lunges toward Du Maurier grabbing his Berretta from the table. He releases the safety, hands trembling he aims the gun at the viper, prepared to shoot while he still can.

Daniel wipes the sweat from his face with the bottom of his tee. The tee is nearly as wet as his face and the soft damp edging of cotton does little to absorb the moisture. He lifts up the shirt and pulls it off entirely and rubs face and head with it. He decides that was much more effective. He drops the filthy shirt into the grass and surveys the back yard. He licks dry lips as he picks up a frosty beer from the bucket of ice at his feet.

The back yard and vegetable garden look much less neglected now. The muscles along his back throb in protest as he eyes the lawn mower. He sucks down half the bottle and grips the handle bars of the lawn mower with the other. There is enough gas to mow the front lawn and the front yard is thankfully flat. He takes another swig of the Italian ale and guides the mower around to the front of the house.

He has not heard from Will all day. He called once, but Will's phone went directly to voice mail. It's off. Will had told him that unless Jack wants to request help from the NSA, all the FBI can do is trace the phone in use to the cell tower it pings off. Jack would only be able to know the general area of where the cell call originated. Along with everyone one else in the area pinging off the same tower. If Will called Jack directly at headquarters, the FBI could be more precise in tracking. Will is definitely not going to call the land line.

Will isn't taking any chances of being caught wherever he is. Unless he is someplace he feels safe about calling from, Daniel is not going to receive any calls. The fog of dread has not lifted since he left the FBI headquarters earlier. Visions of possible outcomes had rolled through his head as the taxi had rolled through traffic on the way back to Fiesole. Disturbing thoughts had pummeled his mind as he had wandered around his house, too agitated to focus on anything. He had felt Will's absence acutely, cutting sharply through floorboards and walls. He doesn't know long he had stared at the pair of dirty mugs in the sink simply lost.

Will has touched his life. He has touched everything in his house. There is nothing contained within its walls and rooms that does not remind Daniel of him, or cause his entire being to wither at the thought he may not ever return.

He rolls the lawn mower into position and drinks again before setting the bottle down. He glances at his stomach. A thin welting of raised flesh threads pink across his belly just above the navel to the other side, contrasting sharply with the tanned skin. In a way, Hannibal has marked him by proxy, the wound in nearly the same place as Will's. Will had borne the brunt of Hannibal's blade alone. Will had saved him from Luciano's.

Will is alone again.

The awful images of what may come are what led to the yard and garden receiving his merciless attention this late afternoon despite the temperature and humidity. The dogs needed to get out and run around anyway. He whistles for them since they are currently out of sight. Cara comes running from one side of the garage, Bella right behind her.

"Let's find your toys, huh?" He says.

He walks the length of the front yard back and forth with the dogs until he locates what he hopes are all their toys, balls, and ropes and deposits them on the front porch. He chuckles as he watches the dogs sniff and paw at the pile of new toys. He thinks some of the toys have been in the yard for weeks.

He sighs and turns to the lawn mower. A shower is going to feel so good he tells himself as he checks the throttle and tugs at the cord to start it up. The dogs recline on the porch with their toys, gnawing at rubber while Daniel tackles the lawn.

He's almost finished when he notices the dogs pacing on the porch, hears the muffled barking beneath the roar of the mower and turns to see a shiny black Mercedes pull into his drive. He knows it's the FBI and wonders if Crawford came alone. His heart lurches as he thinks there could only be a couple reasons for Crawford to come to his home. He leans down and shuts off the mower and walks over to greet Jack, his jaw as tight as his chest, dogs in tow.

"Agent Crawford…" Daniel says, surprised his voice doesn't crack.

Jack watches Clayton approach. Though Clayton wears a thin smile, his brow is creased with worry. He is bracing himself for the worst and Jack decides to let him swing in suspense a while curious to see if Clayton will break and immediately inquire about Will or pretend ignorance.

"Jack…please." Jack says as he climbs out from behind the steering wheel. "Then again, maybe you should continue to call me Agent Crawford. At least that's one way I can tell you apart."

Jack glances at Daniel's naked chest and Daniel silently kicks himself. His mind can't conjure even a single plausible lie for the truths displayed in plain sight. He decides he'll tell Crawford the wounds are therapy. That might even fly.

"We don't really look that much alike."

Wiping the bead of sweat from his nose he looks aside avoiding Jack's penetrating gaze. He senses the anxiety in him and figures Crawford will meander around and probe before disclosing what he really wants to talk about. Crawford's version of quid pro quo. Daniel fusses with the dogs as they sniff Jack's trousers and shoes. He waits for the inquiry about his appearance that doesn't come.

Jack wants him to inquire about Will. Which means Will is still missing in action.

Jack looks Clayton over in his sneakers and shorts. There is enough sweaty skin exposed for Jack to discern there is very little physical difference between Will and Clayton, if any. Remove a man's suit and his secrets reveal themselves. This is especially true of Clayton. The suave psychiatrist lending a hand downtown has disappeared with the professional attire. The abrasions on his face and lip have faded but he notices some bruising at his collar bone and perhaps another bruise poking out from the shorts slung low. The recent cut along his stomach is a glaring incongruity. He decides he does not want to know how Clayton received the wound though he is certain Will had something to do with it. He lifts his eyes back to Clayton's face.

"Oh, yes you do. From a distance you certainly do." Jack says, thinking of Du Maurier. "So…I cut you loose early and you come home to do yard work?"

"Gotta tend your garden, Agent Crawford." Daniel smiles.

"Beautiful property. Ideal location. It really is quite lovely. And so close to Florence. How long you been here?"

"I bought it about five years ago. It's a bit of work keeping it up by myself but worth it. If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need."

"Marcus Aurelius?"

"Cicero."

Crawford glances around and nods in agreement. Maybe he can check out the library later. There are piles of plucked weeds all around the edges of the yard. A terraced vegetable garden grows up the hill at the side of the house, and though the plants are not staked but left to twist and curve along the earth, the vines are heavy laden and ripe with color.

The grounds are at first glance a little haphazard and wild but indications of thoughtful planning are evident in the selection of the plants and their placement. Tall stalks of perennials adorn the yard chosen for the timing of the blooms and for height. Bright petals of yellow and white tumble from the various glazed planters scattered at intervals along the drive and the front porch. Clayton's touch upon his garden is light. He respects its nature and allows it to grow and spread largely unencumbered by human hands.

He can almost see Bella plucking herbs from their garden in Baltimore as his eyes alight again on Clayton's vegetable garden stretching along the sunny side of the house into the back. The scent of cut grass, fresh parsley and tomatoes fills the air.

He notes the work table, the tools and garden implements hanging in the opened garage. He also notes the gleaming wax job on Clayton's burgundy Mercedes in the drive. He glances at the grime and dirt smeared along Clayton's arms and legs and under his fingernails and finds himself warming to Clayton a little more. Away from his desk and his patients, Clayton seems to enjoy tinkering with his hobbies and being outside. Just like someone else he knows. And…just as alone.

"Does Will help tend the garden?"

“He cut the grass last week. He pitches in. Keeping active is good for him.”

“Is your approach to therapy similar to your approach to gardening?”

Daniel turns to look around. He chuckles, the rich rumble that emerges more from his thoughts of Will and less from Jack’s observation. He raises his brows at Jack.

“If you mean I encourage rather than control, then…yes.”

“I guess he likes the dogs.” Jack gestures to the front porch where Cara and Bella have retired with their toys.

“Will…loves the dogs.” Daniel agrees. “And they have adopted him. I’m almost jealous.”

Daniel begins to walk to the side of the house where he left his bucket of beer. Jack follows thinking the dogs are not the only ones who have adopted Will. He’d like a look around inside. He may need to use the bathroom before he leaves.

“Well behaved and very friendly. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised given your practice. What are their names?”

“The little black one is Cara. The shaggy mutt is…Bella.” Daniel says softly.

“Will told you…”

“He did.”

Daniel feels the sorrow wring from Crawford, stinging sweetly as he leans to stroke Bella’s head behind her ears. Crawford murmurs his wife’s name softly as he looks into Bella’s furry face.

Daniel wipes at his chin, swipes the sweat trickling along his jaw and gives Jack a moment. Perspiration beads across Jack’s forehead, but his suit hangs pressed and crisp from broad shoulders. Most of his day has spent in the office. He smells of cigarettes and the cologne he put on this morning. Daniel thinks his cologne and his pressed suit will not last long out here in his drive. Daniel feels like he is evaporating like steam.

“So what brings you to my house, Agent Crawford? You didn’t drive all the way out here to admire my yard or my dogs.”

“Are you this direct with Will?”

“Always. No tender flower our Will.”

Jack chuckles again, “No…he is not.”

Daniel swoops up the half empty bottle from the driveway where he left it as he walks and gulps it down, tepid as it is. They reach the bucket and Daniel offers a beer to Jack which he accepts, glancing at the label.

“Never had this. I guess it’s pretty good?”

“It’s pretty fucking cold, so there’s that.”

Jack grins, tips the bottle at Clayton. “Well, thank you.”

Daniel twists off the cap and glugs down several swallows. Jack does the same. Daniel observes Jack’s eyes roam around his property with trained deliberation, mind cataloging everything for future reference. By his demeanor, Daniel has dismissed the concern that Will is dead. Jack is here for information. Will hasn’t called him either. He gets the feeling that Jack is thinking what he is thinking.

Will is with Hannibal. Neither of them tenders the thought aloud, either.

“You heard from Will?”

“No.”

“Check your phone recently?

“Not since I started on the yard.”

“Did he tell you where he was going?”

“Not specifically, no. You know I wouldn’t tell you if he had. Will lives here. He is my patient. But, he is free to come and go as he pleases.”

Jack chuckles and shakes his head. He expected Clayton to deflect. “Then what non-specifically did he tell you? You must be concerned. That he hasn’t called. You know where he went.”

“We both know what he is looking for. He’s in therapy because of it.”

“You’ll find there is not much of a line to walk where Will is concerned.” Jack says suspecting Clayton has already crossed some lines himself.

“A line you made especially thin by inviting me to join the investigation.”

“You accepted.” Jack says, pointing the bottle at Clayton.

“I want to help and I want to cooperate. Within reason. Will needs to work out some things for himself.”

“So you’re saying running around Florence looking for Lecter is therapy?”

“Why did you let him run around Florence?”

“He would have come with Mason’s money anyway. This way I can keep an eye on him.”

“Doing a great job so far, too.”

“How’s therapy going?” Jack counters with a grimace.

“Therapy takes many forms. I told you sitting on the sidelines would not be enough for him. He needs his closure. You seemed okay with that.”

“He hasn’t called in. There have been some developments since I last talked to him. I am unofficially concerned.”

Daniel sucks on his beer thoughtfully at Jack's choice of words. He hasn't called Will. Jack does not want to account for any calls to Will through FBI channels. Plausible deniability. Fucking FBI.

"You want me to call him. For you. To listen in and locate him."

"If he went looking for Hannibal and found him… If you care what happens to him…"

"If I care? Don't play that card with me. The FBI apparently scoffs at patient doctor confidentiality. It gets in the way doesn't it?"

"I can't protect him if I don't know where he is."

"I don't know where he is. Not that I could have stopped him."

Jack lets out an exasperated sigh. "He's more likely to pick up the call if he sees it's you."

"And then I break confidentiality."

"Is that more important than saving him?" Jack pauses, "Are you his therapist or his friend?"

The green eyes flash with anger or injury Jack can't decide. Clayton is in this quagmire up to his neck. He has to realize that.

"What has he become to you, Doctor Clayton?"

"Are you asking officially or as his friend?"

"I'm just asking. As someone who knows how difficult it is to label anything where Will is concerned."

Jack's eyes fall to his stomach to trail up the length of his torso to fix on his shoulder and collar bone and Daniel watches the gears shift in Jack's mind. Predictably, the gear sticks where it always seems to. Somewhere between brain and mouth.

Jack points to his stomach, "Seems you got a taste of what bit Will."

"Or it got a taste of me."

Clayton's eyes turn a cool jade, not unlike the stony blue stare Jack has received from Will on many occasions and he decides not to chase that train. It is enough that they understand each other. Clayton is not sinking in the quagmire. He has dived head first into it and he is swimming right alongside Will. Jack realizes Clayton knows a lot more about Will and Hannibal than he does. Way more than a lot.

"You know him in ways that I uh…don't." Jack's tone is just a note below courteous as he studies the beer bottle. "I know how feelings and responsibility can be at odds. And you do have feelings for him."

"Careful, Agent Crawford. I may say something actionable."

Jack smiles bitterly at the bottle. Clayton even sounds like Will. "I only need helpful. Call him. No tracking. No FBI. Just us."

Daniel considers all the things Jack isn't telling him. All the things he withholds from Will. About Pazzi. About Du Maurier. Perhaps about Verger and the Paolini. Hannibal is actually the least of Will's worries. Jack Crawford is the only person with the means to affect a rescue should any or all of them converge on Will.

"Just us, huh?"

"Who else does he have?" Jack says. "Will said he doesn't want to make any more mistakes. Neither do I. Will is broken. And I helped break him. You've been trying to help him pick up the pieces. I get that."

"Will is more than a patient to me." Daniel looks to his feet deciding to suck up the obvious. He can give Jack this one. "It took a long time to gain his trust. I value that. But he is still my patient and I take doctor patient confidentiality very seriously, Agent Crawford. Confidentiality is supposed to protect the patient by keeping those confidences shared in therapy."

"And absolve the therapist."

"Like your badge absolves you?"

Jack takes another gulp of the icy beer, lets the flavor roll around his tongue. "How are you going to feel if you don't call him?"

Daniel considers Will could have called already if he had wanted to. He trusts Daniel not to call in the cavalry but the foreboding festers. As does the very real possibility that Will might be unable to call ferments in his gut clear up to his throat to settle dry and metallic there.

"And if he picks up?"

"Depending on what he says, I might not have ever been here."

Daniel huffs through his nose, frustrated and stuck. Will thinks Jack is giving Pazzi the room to go for Mason's reward. Will is game for it, but Daniel questions Will's motives for that. The desire for redemption burns brightly in his tormented soul like the flames in his mind's inferno.

But, Jack wants to know that Will is okay, too. Guilt ruptures from Jack Crawford. He bleeds guilt from a wound so raw that even the calloused detachment of his FBI mindset cannot cauterize it completely. Daniel feels the weight of that guilt every time he is around Jack. He also feels the urgency in Jack, nervous energy twitching along his nerves, collecting in the jaw he holds tightly in between gulps of beer.

Jack Crawford shouldn't be hanging around his house, either. Asking him to leave abruptly is out of the question. Letting him inside would be a disaster. He pulls out his phone, selects Will's number and hits the button. The call goes immediately to voice mail again. He hands the phone to Jack.

Jack puts it to his ear and frowns. "Goddamit, Will." He hands the phone back to Daniel.

"Where's Pazzi? Maybe he knows something you don't?"

"Pazzi has been uncharacteristically quiet. Said Will checked out an address in Impruneta but it was a bust. Will left from there in a taxi hours ago. Hasn't seen him since."

"And you believe him?"

“I believe what he said. It’s what he doesn’t say that concerns me. Look…I could wait…”

“If Will calls me, or I get a hold of him, I promise to call you. I know that you are as worried as I am. You’ll return the favor?”

Jack nods sensing a bathroom break out of the question. “I’ll call you. We’ll find him sooner or later. I just want to find him…alive.”

“So do I.”

Jack finishes his beer, hands the bottle off to Daniel. He glances around the grounds once more as Daniel takes the empty bottle from his hands.

“A man of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds.” Jack says.

“John Adams?”

“Ben Franklin.”

“Then Ben Franklin was full of himself. Actions only speak louder than words when words fall on deaf ears.”

“And you are naïve, Doctor Clayton. Words don’t get people killed.”

“Sure they do. All the time.”

“I’ll uh…be talking to you soon.” Jack says.

“Goodbye, Agent Crawford.”

Jack climbs into his Mercedes and Daniel watches him back the car down his drive. Daniel looks up at the sky. It will be dark in less than half an hour. Summer days are long in Italy. As the darkness of night descends in Fiesole, Daniel thinks his darkness will not disperse even with the dawn.

Will was smart not to call and tell him where he was going. Daniel knows he would have told Crawford everything he knew just now.

Will weaves like a drunk, feet becoming ever more unsteady beneath him as he sways with the gun. It’s the quicksand he thinks. His thoughts are already clouding up; Du Maurier’s face looms pale like a floating moon. Red lips move slowly and her words come sluggish, slurred like puree poured from a blender. He blinks away the blurriness and stares as time seems to grind along at a snail’s pace.

“Hannibal.” Du Maurier says, nodding at Will. “Take the gun from him.”

Hannibal stands motionless as variables click in his mind. Du Maurier has introduced chaos. Not her forte though she seems to be handling it well enough. Her conversation with Uncle Jack has convinced her to shake up the board so she can cut and run to Zurich. Hannibal cannot let her leave just yet. He has more evidence to drop on Jack. And though Will is obviously willing to kill her, he can’t let the cub take his vengeance for this particular assault. Du Maurier has not yet committed the act that will inspire Will to forego the gun altogether in favor of a more personal and intimate encounter.

Du Maurier knows nothing of the body downstairs and has unwittingly provided inspiration. Will cannot now walk out the way he walked in. However he had planned on leaving is no longer an option. But leave he must and if the curtain must fall on this act, then Hannibal will ensure his departure is spectacular. As for Du Maurier…

“Take the gun yourself. What did you think would happen?”

“How…have you…managed to stay…alive?” Will hisses still gripping the gun, knuckles white with the effort.

“My advice to you, Mr. Graham, is to make sure you have something he wants that he cannot have if you are dead.”

“Will.” Hannibal steps behind Will, grabs the shaking shoulders to steady him. “You only have a couple minutes if that. You are likely going to miss your target and make an awful racket. I need to know what she gave you.”

“I…don’t care…” Will turns the gun to the side, tries to level it with Du Maurier’s head.

He watches du Maurier become the gigantic serpent from his inferno swallowing winged Daniel whole, rapaciously sucking down flesh and crunching bone, gluttonous appetite, but wanting more…wanting something…

Du Maurier turns her head to the side, offers Will her profile. He sways with the movement and his knees start to buckle. Du Maurier smiles. Ketamine will drop a horse. Graham should be put down, but Hannibal would kill her had the dose been lethal, code or not. As it is, Graham has seconds now before he collapses. Her primary concern is the gun firing off when he hits the floor.

“Hannibal. The weapon can discharge if…”

“I know.” Hannibal would prefer Du Maurier wrestle for the gun herself, but… “Will, this…is not the reckoning you want.”

Will turns his head in Hannibal’s direction; the words shimmer in his consciousness, words spoken in another time, another place, but similar context. A coded message from deep within their shared and shattered universe, a universe Du Maurier trespasses like a tireless comet destined to crash. His eyelids droop, his tongue thickens between his teeth and his body weighs a ton. He lets his arm drop; the touch of Hannibal’s fingers over his own is a relief. He allows Hannibal to ease the Berretta from his grasp as he had in the barn with Ingram.

“Will…look at me.” The voice commands, and Will obeys, manages to acknowledge with a lift of his head.

There is a whiff of sandalwood and musk at his nose suddenly, the scent warm and pleasant upon the thumbs that send lids to fluttering, fighting the heaviness but losing the battle.

“I…I..didn’t finish…my dessert…” Will mumbles, words sticking to tongue and lips as ocean roars in his ears.

“Nor did I. Remember that.” Hannibal says so softly Will barely hears him.

Hannibal’s face fades to black and Will is floating, listening to fragments of conversation from distant voices, voices he recognizes and he knows he should try and pay attention, but it’s hard. It’s really hard to focus…

As Hannibal steps over the toppled chair to ease Will into another chair, movement and a creak in the floorboards registers. There is the glint of metal to his right. He lets go of Will, hears the thump of his head hit the table as he turns in time to knock Du Maurier into his mahogany curio cabinet. Murano glass and Majolica pottery crash against the delicate glass panes as Du Maurier struggles to maintain her balance as she too crashes against the cracked panes of glass.

“Bedelia…I am impressed. We have graduated from cutlery to syringes?”

The cabinet rocks on its spindly legs as Du Maurier folds nearly in half to keep herself from falling forward. A rainbow of glass tumbles through the ruined panes, a cacophony of tinkling as Hannibal’s collection clatters thunderously to land strewn across floor and rug glittering like crushed diamonds. Du Maurier freezes.

But for Graham’s ragged breathing there is blessed silence.

Du Maurier sweeps her hair from her face so she can look at Hannibal dead on, syringe still clenched in her hand. She had only needed scant seconds to sink the syringe into his shoulder. Jack Crawford would have his killers and she would be free.

She stands helpless instead before this creature of flesh and blood that holds her captive in his madness. She tosses her head back, disappointment and anger quickly quelled in the face of the killer smiling at her, nary a hair out of place on his regal head as he stands beside the bane of her existence.

She draws herself up and takes a step away from the curio, crushing more glass beneath her heels as she lurches toward the table.

“Would you mind…opening the wine?” She says, her voice a tremulous warbling. “I could use a glass.”

Du Maurier tosses her head, smooths the collar of her blouse and with trembling fingers caresses the gold chain about her throat.

Hannibal glances at Will face down on the table. “Why not?” he says. “Would you mind handing me the syringe?”

The 1993 bottle of Avignonesi is quickly opened and Hannibal pours with mild trepidation, eyes on Du Maurier’s quivering hand as she holds out her glass. She immediately takes the glass to her lips and exhales slowly as the rare vintage tingles down her throat.

“Feeling better?” Hannibal asks while pouring his own.

“Much.” She answers watching Hannibal dip his nose into crystal.

“No more broken glass this evening. Please.”

“That…is entirely up to you, Hannibal.”

“Your purse. May I?” Hannibal gestures toward the leather Versace bag.

Du Maurier raises a brow. “Why not?” She shrugs.

Hannibal removes items one by one laying them on the table. He notes the slim leather wallet, phone, lipstick and…a small black device, no larger than a pack of matches. Hannibal holds the slender plastic parcel up to the light of the chandelier.

“Agent Crawford gave you a present for your trouble.”

Du Maurier does not hesitate. “Jack Crawford has left me with no choice. You suggested I contact him and this…” Du Maurier gestures about the dining room, a dismissive wave of her hand directed at Will, “was a decision forced upon me.”

“What did Agent Crawford promise you?”

“I was presented with another immunity deal, but it is valid only if I actively assist in your capture. Graham was supposed to assist. He is not surprised at seeing me here. I don’t trust him and neither should you. ”

“What makes you think I won’t kill you, Bedelia?”

“I have a bank code that says otherwise.”

“So have I. And if I am apprehended? You won’t get mine. But you already know this.” Hannibal turns to look at the viper.

“The status quo remains.” Du Maurier sips at the delicious wine, her head already cleared of the clutter of a moment ago. “Except I would be free and you would not. Perhaps Agent Crawford would arrange for you to be incarcerated together.”

“*A* status quo remains. What you do next is up to you.”

Du Maurier can either allow Jack Crawford to assume the worst, that Hannibal has discovered her deception or she can contact Crawford, continue to misdirect and otherwise confuse. Jack will be in possession of highly incriminating evidence should she contact him. Hannibal has manufactured a blind spot for the viper. However she moves her pieces will not impinge on Hannibal’s design. She will not expose herself to Mason Verger or to Pazzi. She will likely seek to use Clayton to manipulate Will. And that…is part of the design.

“You have surprised me, Bedelia, and I do…enjoy surprises.” Hannibal says, knowing the reference lost on Du Maurier. Will would have enjoyed it. Hannibal glances at the graceless figure drooling on his tablecloth. Perhaps not.

Du Maurier shrugs her narrow shoulders as the wine buzzes pleasantly in her head. Empty words. Empty praise. She is tempted to look at her watch but refrains.

Instead, Du Maurier sets down her wine glass and walks over to Graham, slumped over the table like a rag. She begins to rummage through the pockets of his wrinkled jacket. Out comes Will's phone and the knife Hannibal gave him, symbol of their truce.

"He brought a gun and a knife." Du Maurier says with a smug twist of her lips.

She resumes checking pockets as Hannibal hovers over the table, curious and…with a grudging gleam in his eyes. She leans closer and nuzzles an ear with her lips, buries her nose into the silky curls and, as she breathes in the scent of faded cologne and sweat from the soft strands so does Hannibal's expression leave her giddy with spite.

She lifts her head. ”I expect weakness from others, but not from you."

Du Maurier grabs a handful of hair and tugs Will's head up so Hannibal is staring over his wine glass at Graham's listless yet endearing face. The dark eyes flash possessive and cruel over the rim of crystal. The predator's nostrils tic with sweat and musk, Graham's particular scent has imprinted indelibly and it is to Hannibal as compelling as any aphrodisiac.

"Your weakness for him is a disease."

"No one is perfect." Hannibal sniffs his wine. "I choose my torments and they are mine alone to bear."

"Not yours alone. I am immune to the disease but not from the madness it inflicts."

"Your torment to bear."

"Were I to slam his head on this table rather than reverently lower it, would your anger burn silent from across the room or would you spring across the table to grab my throat?"

"Better the devil you know, Bedelia. You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough."

"What happens now, Hannibal? "

"What you like to happen?"

"Opportunity to discover his intentions has presented itself."

"What did you give him? The same as Clayton?"

"A little of this and a little of that. The quick acting sedative is ketamine. Perhaps twenty minutes of heavy sedation for that."

"Excellent choice. Ketamine is the least oppressive to the pulmonary system, but your cocktail contains more than ketamine. How long will he be out?"

"There's a benzodiazepine to extend the unconscious state."

"That accounts for the rapid loss of consciousness. Diazapam? Midazolam?"

Du Maurier demurs. She taps her nails against the crystal, listens to the soft pinging chime. "He'll be highly suggestible. Your chance to directly question him...among other things."

Du Maurier lets down the tousled mane gently, very gently onto the table. Hannibal sets down his glass, begins to circle the table edging towards Du Maurier. The viper is secure in her confidence. Du Maurier regards Hannibal approaching her with detachment and Hannibal continues to inflate that confidence.

“You gave him GHB?”

“GHB only lasts perhaps four hours. The effects of this cocktail will last twice that long before winding down. Perhaps a full twelve hours to wear off completely. When he wakes up from the ketamine, he’ll be eating out of your…hands. Figuratively, of course.”

Hannibal finds her innuendo deplorable and highly inappropriate as she intended. She mocks his sensibilities for insulting hers regarding Clayton. Her sense of confidence radiates like the glow of wine flushes warmly upon her cheeks. Like the serpent sunning itself in the garden.

“His speech and coordination will be compromised but not entirely subdued.” Hannibal says.

“If he becomes ambulatory, you can always sedate him again. Restraints should be adequate. I’m sure you have plenty of substances of your own.”

“Will’s mind is unique. These drugs will prompt hallucinations and a dissociative state. Highly suggestable and compliant, yes. But there is no point in questioning him like this. Chilton tried. Without success.”

Hannibal thinks perhaps Clayton was more successful and wonders what drugs he had used on Will. He must remember to ask him next time he sees him.

“You might have mentioned that earlier.” Du Maurier tops off her glass.

“You might have consulted with me before doing something so rash. Your unilateral approach to our interests bears closer scrutiny.”

Hannibal considers he could very well be sitting on a chair next to Will. Two presents all but gift wrapped for Jack Crawford. Du Maurier had come too close to succeeding for comfort. A most dangerous viper he let loose in his garden.

“If not indulge your…curiosity; what will you do with him, then? You may be prepared to see what form his betrayal takes, but I am not.”

“I need him.”

“What for? Except to hasten your own destruction?”

“The Paolini want him almost as much as me. Their infiltration of the FBI and Polizia has led them to believe I would intervene if they have him.”

“And you confirmed their belief in the alley, with Graham.”

“Yes. If Will is my enemy then he will have to be my enemy right beside me. Much more difficult to accomplish than if he works against me in the shadows. I am quite capable of seeing him as he is, not as I wish him to be.”

“And what assurance do I have of that? You mentioned an account for him. Your clever anagram of Mariah. W. Gillam, I believe? To frame him or reward him with a gift? You think you have this all worked out, don’t you?”

“What would you have me do, Bedelia?”

“Walk away. He is a weed, Hannibal, but it is your garden.”

“It is.”

Du Maurier knows Hannibal will ignore her advice. Walking away is exactly what he should do. Her plan would fall apart if Hannibal would leave Florence now, today. She would be forever looking over her shoulder until he found her…again.

But no...Hannibal will indulge his obsession and sink into his abyss with Graham at his side.

Du Maurier walks to stand beside Hannibal. Her perfume floats upon the air as she collects her belongings Hannibal had arranged on the table. She slowly packs them back into her purse.

“Leaving so soon?”

“He is your oil spill, Hannibal. I leave you to contain it.”

Hannibal says nothing but stands quietly appraising her and the blank stare is more chilling than the expected malevolence.

After a moment, madness speaks.

“I hope you’re not leaving angry. Bad for digestion.”

Du Maurier turns her sapphire eyes upon the wreckage on the floor. Hannibal will sweep it up and toss it away without a second thought. He will not be sweeping the wreckage from his table so easily. Du Maurier is curious what Hannibal’s intentions are regarding his precious Graham but knows better than to inquire.

“When you have finished cleaning up…your mess, Hannibal, you are welcome to my home in Siena.”

“Thank you. Most considerate of you. You’ll be returning to Fiesole?”

“Yes. I have some matters of my own to attend to…in anticipation of your resolution of the Paolini. Happy hunting, Hannibal.”

“I’ll be in touch. But, before you leave, this device…how does it work?”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
“You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.” William Blake, Proverbs of Hell.

Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Hannibal turns opportunity into an exceptional tableau even for him. Will, of course, will be expected to explain it from his unique perspective. That is…once he stops hallucinating. Daniel is asked for a favor…from Hannibal. And Jack is developing a distinct distaste for classical art.

The pain comes fresh and crisp along his back as bones crack and plumes of black feathers fan across skin. Dark wings emerge from split shoulders slowly unfolding over his head as brittle as kindling. Will feels hot breath on his cheek, a whiff of sandalwood and leather then the scent is gone, in its place floats the odor of decay.

Good and evil exist together. The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell; a hell of heaven. So it is with the garden, Will. See the garden in your inferno.

Before Will opens his eyes he knows he no longer lies on the beach happily caught in young Hannibal's embrace. He lies on the broken ground of his mind's hell, his inferno, and the red rimmed eyes of the creature bear down on him from above, its talons caress the wound that seeps blood onto the charred and ruined ground, drops of crimson all around.

Bring him back.

You can't have one without the other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 72

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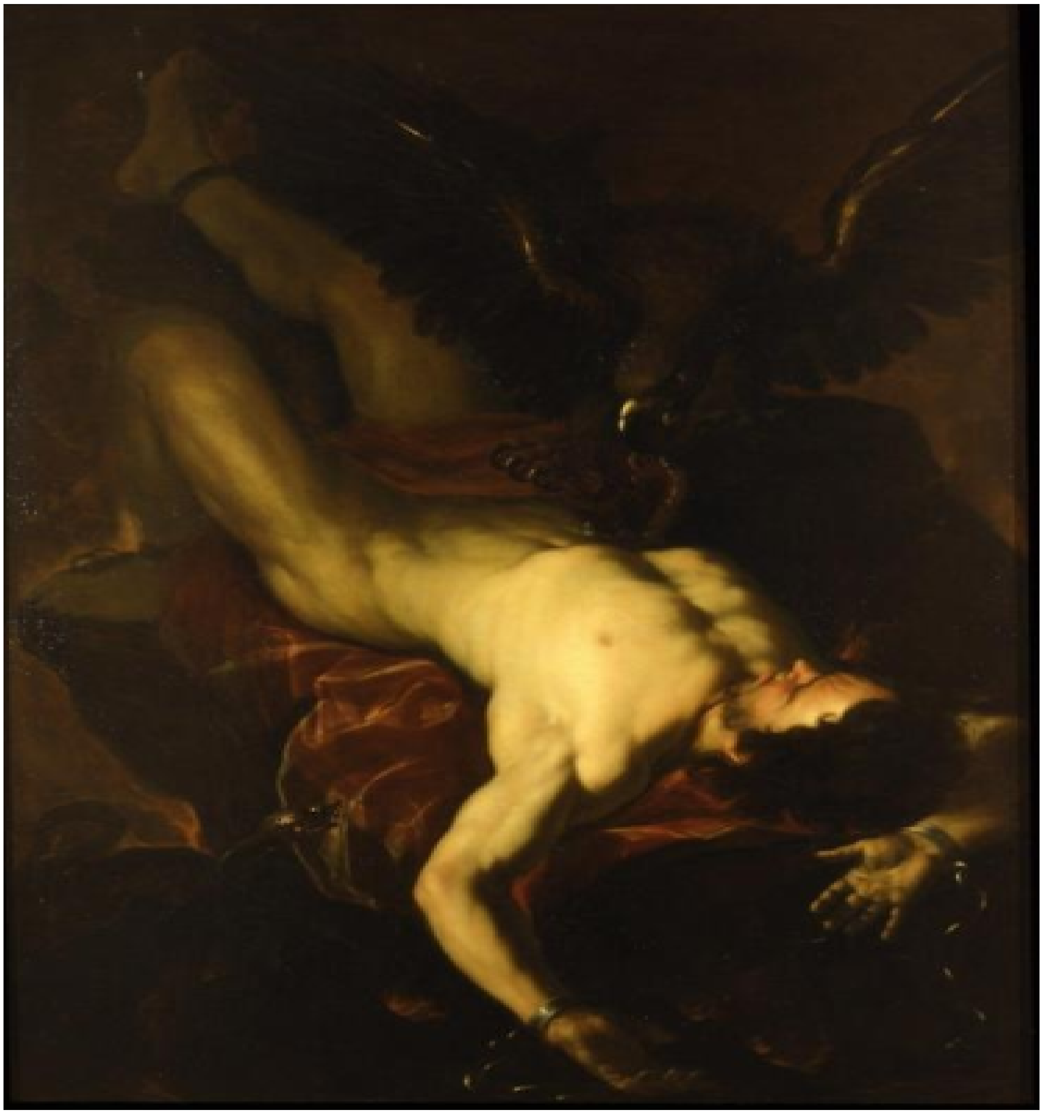


Prometheus Bound, Luca Giordano, 1660

Envoi (prayer)

Glory and praise to Thee, Satan, on high,

Where Thou didst reign, in Hell where Thou dost lie,

Vanquished, silent, dreaming eternally.

Grant that my soul someday rest close to Thee

Under the Tree of Knowledge which shall spread

Its branches like a Temple overhead.

Fleurs du Mal, Litanies of Satan, Charles Baudelaire translated by Jacques LeClercq, (Mt Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1958)

Will is not so numbed that he does not feel the abrupt slam of his head upon Hannibal's dining room table or sense the flurry of movement behind him. Hannibal's hands had just been gripping his shoulders and then they were gone, a slicing of molecules in the air, as faint as fog or a whisper but keenly felt. The sound of voices hovers over the table that has become the extent of Will's immediate environment. He listens to Hannibal's voice, mild with amusement though edged with accusation.

Bedelia…I am impressed. We have graduated from cutlery to syringes?

The crash of glass that follows in the wake of Hannibal's words is deafening, a moment of complete silence and the grinding of shoes against glass gives way to the crackling of flames. Will lifts his head and sits up in his chair and sees his inferno through the archway into the kitchen. Will thinks it fitting his inferno manifests in Hannibal's hollowed haven of creation. He looks down at himself as he stands up and away from the chair, a jarring sight initially but Will feels peaceful and he accepts the image of his likeness inert and draped over the table. He glances at the ghosts of Hannibal and Bedelia circling each other around the table and walks past them into the living room to stand before the ornately carved desk by the open French doors. Hannibal's drawings cover its gleaming surface and Will begins to rifle through the pile of thick paper. Sheet after sheet flies from the table and floats to the floor weightless as feathers upon a breeze. Will's fingers grasp the edges of the drawing he wants.

He stares at the figures. Line and shadow are rendered with the surgeon's eye for anatomy, every muscle drawn with exactitude and with the artist's love of the human form. Hannibal's pain is pressed into each perfectly etched line of graphite, the ache of his loneliness so profound that he had seen fit to place his own likeness beside Will's. Hannibal never draws self-portraits. Ever. Except for this.

Will holds a drawing of Achilles and his beloved Patroclus, who else?

The appearance of Achilles in every other picture drawn by Hannibal's hand has been generic, always blonde and beardless; the head sometimes obscured or turned away, but even when visible it is never Hannibal's face. The drawing Will holds in his hands depicts both men, younger and lacking the gravitas of mature warriors. They sit on a beach, Patroclus in a white chiton, his muscular back in view as he faces the sea his head in profile as he gazes down at Achilles. Achilles' blonde head rests on Patroclus' thigh as he holds a flat board on his stomach bracing it against his knees. His right hand is raised and it holds a split reed poised over the animal skin pinned and stretched across the plank of wood. Achilles' pose is languid and familiar as he reclines against Patroclus, the folds of his gray chiton fall carelessly from his limbs as he gazes up at his whiskered dark haired companion.

Patroclus looks upon his friend with lips parted, engaged in conversation, his expression a recognizable approximation of the indulgent visage Will often presents to Hannibal. But it is Achilles' expression that summons the synchronous harmony Will had experienced at dinner. The reclining figure of Achilles exudes contentment.

A flash of light from beyond the French doors illuminates the darkened living room and the sound of water flowing nearby becomes the tumbling of waves. Will drops the drawing, leaving it on the desk in favor of the seashore outside.

His inferno appears past the dunes, its fiery orange light burns the sky but Will walks barefoot steadily across the sand in his chiton toward the figure already seated in the near distance, head inclined to chest deep in thought, his right hand gripping slender reed, a small clay jar of black ink firmly entrenched in the sand.

Took you long enough. Young Hannibal looks up from his matted skein of vellum at Will's approach.

Long enough to join you here? Or to think of you like this? Will calls out as he hastens his pace.

Both I think.

Young Hannibal pats the sand turning his head into the breeze; wisps of hair slap his face like loose golden laces, strands of sunlight across burnished brows.

You will join me, won't you? He says.

Is that a trick question? Will says, rubbing at whiskers.

It is…a rhetorical question.

Young Hannibal's lips spread wide across his smooth face as Will halts to stand beside him. He is as beautiful as Will could ever wish him to be. And as proud and haughty as ever. This Hannibal is a mirror image of the Achilles in the drawing. Had Hannibal drawn himself as he perceived Will would want him to appear? Are the young men in the sketch products of Hannibal's or Will's imagination?

Were you moved by me or by the Fates? Or perhaps the Shades of Rodin's Gates?

Will's eyes crease with mirth in spite of himself. *The Shades were placed as misdirection.*

Misdirection for the FBI, Will. I know your heart, your smell, your breath. Consciously, or unconsciously you foreshadowed my death.

Did I?

As surely as Patroclus' shade visited Achilles. Should Achilles divide his hair from his head, and follow Patroclus to his grave instead?

That is what happens, Hannibal. It is Fate that Patroclus and Achilles die.

Will looks down into Hannibal's perturbed face, a grimace quickly gone gives way to a raised and amused brow. Sadness plucks again, a stroke of the hammer upon the strings of his heart. He wants. He wants so much and hates that he wants…

Achilles imagines Patroclus' shade comes to visit him. He disappears before the touch of Achilles' warm embrace. Would you tempt me now with your tender face? Hannibal taunts.

How could I have ever let you know me as I did? Will says.

In all fairness, you were left with little choice. You opened a door and I walked through at your behest. Your sense of reciprocity took care of the rest.

And yours.

And mine. I let you see me freely. You…hid from me.

Will plunks down in the sand so his shoulders barely brush Hannibal's, the nearness of his warm flesh a comfort at odds with the bleak and smoldering landscape he knows hovers just beyond the dunes at his back.

"*Did I?*" Will says. "*I hid nothing you couldn't find. Eventually*."

Will's fingers play across the silken chiton that clings about his waist as the thing curls in his bowels. He listens to Hannibal breathe and soon they breathe with the same rhythm, both of them looking out over the sea that stretches to the horizon.

You've come a long way to find me. Hannibal says into the wind.

Can't seem to stay away.

They'll find us here. Hannibal warns.

They…always do. Will says, sinking toes into the sand, *I didn't find you as much as you led me here.*

I hoped you would follow. Hannibal's breath falls maddeningly soft upon his shoulder.

Achilles and Patroclus grew up together from childhood. Companions from an early age. But there is no Patroclus to share your childhood memories. Will turns his head toward the lusty breath that alights hot upon his skin.

I was surrounded by other children at the orphanage, but my companions were my books. As were yours. Always the new boy at school, always the stranger.

I was…very strange I suppose. What is that you're drawing?

The siege of Troy. Its walls are very close now, aren't they? We were preparing for battle at dinner.

Dinner…became a battle. I lost.

Troy first, viper later.

Achilles and Patroclus died in that battle.

In that life. Whose armor does Patroclus wear this time?

I haven't put any on.

Haven't you? You were with me just now. Did you let me see you this time or did you present me with a mirror again, thinking I would be satisfied to see a reflection of myself in you?

Will nudges young Hannibal, shoulder to shoulder as he extends his arm out to hold his hand before Hannibal's face and bends forefinger to thumb leaving a smidgeon of space between. Hannibal frowns.

Will opens his thumb and finger wider, tilts his head with a teasing twist of his lips.

How generous of you.

Hannibal sighs, sets the vellum aside to rest alongside the reed and jar of ink. *Habits. Familiar patterns of behavior are comfortable. Moving beyond limitations is uncomfortable.*

For both of us. Your…habits are as ingrained as mine.

Sounds like a problem we could solve together…

Hannibal runs his fingers under the faucet of the oversized porcelain tub that rests upon the bowed molded brass legs of lion's paws, claws curving into the marble floor. He adjusts the temperature and glances at his bed where Will rests comfortably on his side, still sedated from the ketamine but the effects have waned over the past half hour. Whatever benzodiazepine Du Maurier introduced, it has hold of him now. Hannibal can talk to him, persuade him to do simple things, but he is not cognizant of Hannibal. He will obey on autopilot while his mind plays somewhere else.

Hannibal thinks that Du Maurier injected him with a pre-op dose of what anesthesiologists refer to as a twilight cocktail. Relaxed and immobile, patients are able to follow simple commands if required. Will will have no memory of anything from the second the Ketamine kicked in. It would appear Du Maurier gave her cocktail an extra layer of sedation. But, unlike the usual patient whose conscious mind remains in the operating room, his experience there erased from his short term memory, Will's conscious mind has departed completely.

Du Maurier has also departed and Hannibal had spent the subsequent hour preparing Ruggerio for his design before rigor set in fully. Easing a body out of rigor can be done, but Hannibal does not have the time. Keeping the detective nice and cold in his meat locker will decelerate the effects long enough for his purpose. He needs to concentrate on Will now.

He'll need to remove all evidence of Will having been here from him. Before Du Maurier's interference Will would have been able to manage the imminent inquires upon his return to Florence himself. But Will will not be strolling into FBI headquarters in control of his narrative. He is a part of Hannibal's narrative now, and will instead be found by the FBI and so; it must appear that Hannibal erased all evidence of Will's encounter, including his memory of it.

He gazes at the sleeping form on his bed. Comparisons with Baltimore are unavoidable. Slipping a sedated Will out of his clothes is nothing new. Hannibal's induced seizures had often left Will dazed and in a dissociated state so deep he had once driven several hundred miles unaware of doing so. As Hannibal methodically frees the buttons of Will's shirt he knows Will's inner dreamscape will not be breached by anything he does or says. Will is only vaguely aware of his physical environment.

Although he will not remember his actual experience, Hannibal thinks it possible Will's hallucinations might imprint more deeply. Will's imagination is formidable. Will's imagination fueled by drugs, even more so. Will's dreamscape can be affected by external stimuli because even if Will is not consciously aware; his brain is.

Hannibal wonders where Will is and what he is hallucinating as he opens Will's shirt wide. He looks down at Will's torso, eyes drawn immediately to the long scar that stretches across his midriff as Hannibal recalls the act that drew it there. Even in the dim lamplight of the bedroom, the cord of raised sutured flesh is stark against the smooth skin. He looks upon Will's face, remembers the look in his eyes as he had delivered his forgiveness, his punishment. So much anguish had registered in that face and Hannibal had silently reveled in Will's agony.

He had stepped outside into the rain, and had felt the streaming rivulets of cold cleanse the blood away; cleanse him of his life in Baltimore, his rage sated so that it was manageable once again. As he had sunk into his first class seat next to Du Maurier, the pain had imploded inside; a fissure had opened in his chest as he had sipped his champagne. Only then had he realized that his actions had neither purged him of his anger nor had the rain cleansed him of anything. The rage had become frozen in a block of ice, regret inescapable no matter how many sketches he drew because Will had reached up from the blood streaked floor to rip out that most tender chunk of Hannibal's heart and he holds it even now, stretched out on the bed, vulnerable and completely at Hannibal's mercy.

Didn't I?

Hannibal looks upon the beautiful creature that torments him, his fingers flinch with the thought that he could end it now. Could watch Will draw his last breath, his lips turn from pink to blue to filmy white. Leave Ruggerio downstairs. Allow the FBI to infer from the evidence in his villa whatever they want. Make a stop in Fiesole and make a sumptuous tableau and meal of Du Maurier before leaving Italy, perhaps even look up his cousin in France. The entire world is his and he has unfettered and limitless access to a Swiss bank account that ensures he will enjoy every imaginable lavish comfort exploring it.

But he would explore it alone.

For the first couple months after leaving Baltimore, Hannibal had hoped his punishment sufficient to spawn a venom and hatred that would send Will across the ocean to take his vengeance. A worthy adversary and one he might vanquish once and for all. Will Graham would die and Hannibal's weakness would die with him.

Will had not come.

More months had followed, and as he had sat alone in his dining room taking his meals, staring at the Boucher hanging on his wall, the longing for what could have been had sent him seeking refuge in his garden and his memory palace. In his memory palace he had reimagined and reassessed events and his desire to see Will again as companion rather than adversary had bloomed as full and red as the roses in his garden. Thoughts of companionship had soothed the wound Will had carved into him far more than thoughts of enmity. Hope had flourished that Will had found it within himself to embrace the fledgling predator Hannibal had seen in glimpses with Randall and Mason. Glimpses Will had also seen, and had found so repulsive he had lied about Lounds in an effort to conceal it.

And still, Will had not come.

Du Maurier had kept him company. Had tolerated him, seduced and charmed him, all the time watching, waiting, and plotting against him. She had introduced him to Clayton; and with that introduction, had unwittingly provided Hannibal with an epiphany. The day he had waited outside Clayton's office with his pad and pencils and had watched the young doctor wipe a damp errant lock of hair from his forehead, he had seen Will for the briefest of moments and his impulse had not been to finish what he had left to Fate on his kitchen floor. His impulse had been to finish what he had started that day, long ago in Jack Crawford's office.

What he has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine, and maybe some other points of view that scare him. It's an uncomfortable gift, Jack. Perception's a tool that's pointed on both ends. This cannibal you have him getting to know I think I can help good Will see his face.

And now, the cub is here. Tea cup shattered. The hiding and the revealing of identities begins anew.

Hannibal sighs, feeling the familiar battle wage within. He eases himself onto the bed, positions his body so he sits flush beside Will's still form and bends low so his warm lips caress the wound he carved with cold calloused precision. With every pass of his mouth over the raised flesh the block of ice containing his rage melts a little. The rage burns like a furnace at the thought of Will deceiving him again. Not for Jack and the FBI this time, but for himself. Will's remorse burns, too. He twists in his inferno engulfed in his fire of regrets as he had sat at Hannibal's table earlier, every bite fueling flames already too hot to bear. Aroused and delighted by the taste and pained by the scalding that every swallow had wrought.

Hannibal draws away from the cub's belly, the taste of Will's flesh clinging tangy and sweet upon his lips. Their universe is not yet comfortable enough for Will. Hannibal is more patient, but the cub is still afraid. Will has told himself he wants Mason's revenge to succeed and he lures Hannibal to share in his demise. Hannibal must make sure Will does not tempt the Fates again. Patience. Hasn't Will learned that Hannibal knows him better than he knows himself?

Young Hannibal pushes Will into the sand hands on either side of Will's shoulders and lowers his body onto Will's though Will's hands push against the smooth toned chest to stop him, a playful stubborn smile parts the soft oddly shaped lips and the light of affection glows behind the dark eyes that stare down at him. He lifts Will's chiton, sliding his hands along Will's body taking the fabric up to his chest, wedging silk under his arms so his entire lower half is exposed and within young Hannibal's reach.

He lowers his head to Will's navel and drops a kiss, and another until he has left a trail of saliva across Will's belly.

Will grabs a handful of blonde hair, tugs his head back up to look at him.

What do you think is going to happen?

What always happens, Will. You let me see you, taste you, touch you, for a little while before you hide from me…again…

"I have to remove your clothes, Will." Hannibal says, laying a thumb aside a furrowed brow. He knows Will doesn't hear his words, but his brain registers them nonetheless.

Eyelids flutter as Will's mindscape adjusts to his physical environment with the tugging of Hannibal's fingers on his shirt sleeves. Hannibal feels the tension collect beneath his fingertips as Will grasps what is happening and sensations are reinterpreted and reimagined in his mind. He finishes removing the shirt and lets Will relax upon the bed once again, distress countered by drugs and imagination.

Young Hannibal's hand gropes under Will's chiton, slipping, probing between tense thighs. Will purses his lips in mild protest but otherwise does not move. Hannibal grinds him into the sand, reaches more boldly this time, grasping the silken pouch there, squeezing the tender seam of flesh between thumb and fingers until Will groans with pleasure, closing his thighs over Hannibal's hand.

I'm going to take off your clothes. Do you know why?

You want me to reveal myself…to you.

As I have revealed myself to you. I would take nothing from you that you were not prepared to give.

And what have you given? What have you revealed? Will chides. *You still wear your chiton.*

Young Hannibal leans down close, touches his lips to Will's as he speaks*, Because I wait for you to take it from me…*

Will moans softly, vaguely aware of Hannibal's insistent tugging at his shoulders then hips as past and present, sensation and dream blend and blur in his mind, the real and the imagined one and the same. Hannibal smiles to himself. Wherever Will is; he is resisting there, too.

"I had imagined a different sort of intimate encounter for us but…this is necessary, I'm afraid. Your clothes contain evidence." Hannibal says simply, narrating his actions for Will, curious and fascinated by Will's involuntary cries and gasps.

He slips his fingers between flesh and fabric to take the waistband in hand. Will flinches. The button of his trousers comes apart next, then zipper. Hannibal grips the waistband on either side and gives the pants a good yank.

Will's breath quickens and hands come up in a surprisingly fast remonstration, but finding the effort too great, the hands fall away from Hannibal's wrists and he drifts back to his dream. Hannibal thinks Du Maurier again miscalculated the dosage of her cocktail. Will should not be moving at all. Then again, when does Will ever respond as expected?

"Your clothes contain evidence the broken Trojan pony should not have." Hannibal continues with his narration always finding the sound of his own voice agreeable, "There is enough evidence in your stomach should they choose to look for it."

Hannibal thinks that possibility highly unlikely. Pazzi might request forensic testing, a stool or other sample, but Jack won't go for it. Jack's instinct will be to protect Will. Jack won't allow the Polizia to tread on Will or his authority. Especially not after seeing the spectacle Hannibal has in mind. Will's hands move along forearms to rest on Hannibal's wrists again. Hannibal pushes them away, eases each hand to the mattress.

"Where has your imagination taken you, I wonder." Hannibal muses aloud, "Let go of my hands and lie still."

Will relents, opens his fingers releasing Hannibal's wrists from the tenuous and largely symbolic hold. His fingers find his trousers and he kneads at the fabric instead not quite able to grip but slender fingers go through the motions anyway. Hannibal knows the tactile contact soothes the frayed nerves and summons positive associations. A coping mechanism left over from childhood perhaps. Overwhelmed and stressed trying to manage his gift; it is easy enough to picture Will with a blanket in one hand and a thumb in his mouth.

Lips may tremble and purse together in protest but resisting physically is beyond Will for the moment. His hands may clench the fabric of his trousers as he closes his eyes in concentration, but coordinated movement is difficult for him. Walking unassisted will not be possible for a while longer. Hannibal glances at the tub slowly filling with water.

The trousers come off with little difficulty, one leg then the other. Hannibal tugs at the soft plaid boxers next.

“Will…lift your bottom up.”

Will rolls his hips and Hannibal deftly slides the boxers over the smooth cheeks of his backside and off they come easy as pie. Hannibal’s hands clench at his sides as his eyes move over Will’s naked form. Bruises have blossomed along the pristine thighs and between his legs; few they are, but fresh. Purple blooms adorn Will’s sweet spot along the clavicle, the hollow at the bottom of his throat Hannibal claims as his own. Clayton has been nibbling at his cub, and the cub has no doubt nibbled back.

The meals shared between Clayton and Will have been served hot; quite unlike the reheated repasts he has ruefully shared with Du Maurier. A tasty dish this handsome young doctor, one that Hannibal may have to sample himself if Will is inclined to share…or not.

Hannibal walks to the bathroom, shuts off the faucet and tests the temperature of the bath he has drawn for the wayward cub sprawled on his bed.

Young Hannibal takes Will’s hands in his own, raises them over Will’s head to pin them into the sand. Will wriggles, lets Hannibal hold him in place for a moment and then brings his knees up unsettling his blonde companion enough so that seconds later, he stares down into mischievous eyes and grinning mouth. His chiton drops so it settles on his thighs. As Will rocks his body to and fro the sleek fabric rides up again and silk gives way to smooth skin.

Will tugs at Hannibal’s chiton and Hannibal boldly raises his arms over head, inviting Will to remove it, hips undulating pleasantly against Will’s cock. Will pulls the fabric up as Hannibal lifts from the ground to accommodate him. Will throws the chiton aside. Hannibal stretches along the sand, completely nude and twisting beautifully upon the shimmering pebbles just for Will.

I lay revealed. With open arms and restless thighs. Hannibal says, *Now you.*

Warm hands again tease at the hem of Will’s chiton, raising it high along his torso. Will bends forward as Hannibal pulls the chaste white chiton over the tangled mane of curls damp with ocean mist and sprinkled with sand. Will unfolds his body along the sturdy frame beneath him, opens his mouth, and shivers with unbridled anticipation as Hannibal slips his tongue inside.

Ocean roars in Will’s ears as water rushes over his head and he tumbles with Hannibal, drawn into the sea. A scrambling of pliant limbs as they circle each other in the water, and soon long legs wrap deliciously around Will’s waist and Hannibal’s tongue dips into his waiting mouth again as they sink into the waves.

Hannibal pulls Will up from the depths of the tub, sputtering and gasping for air.

“Sorry, Will.”

He rubs the shampoo into the luxurious locks, works up a good lather, and unceremoniously dunks Will again. He works in a few dollops of conditioner and again dunks the shaking head into the water. The mouth opens and spitting and sputtering follows. Hannibal tugs at drenched curls just to watch the lift of eyebrows and the scraping of teeth along the plump lower lip.

He runs his hand along the edge of the tub to search for the bar of soap as he struggles to keep Will’s head up. He is getting quite wet with Will’s thrashing about. He thinks Du Maurier’s definition of subdued drastically different from the conventional understanding of the term. Will is not subdued.

“No, no. Will. Hands…up here” Hannibal wrests Will’s hands up and out of the water.

Amusement pulls at his mouth, Will’s inner landscape a mystery, as Hannibal assists Will in placing his hands on either side of the tub though the impulse to allow them to remain undisturbed wedged between his legs lingers.

He rubs the fine Castilian soap methodically into the washcloth and washes Will’s face first working his way down as the water becomes cloudy with the grime and dirty sweat that had clung in dark rings around Will’s neck and nestled in the bends of his elbows.

Hannibal scrubs with a clinical efficiency, wash then rinse, over and over, and soon he is washing pink toes that wriggle testily at his touch. Most curious Hannibal thinks that the touching of Will’s toes elicits a tremor of response when washing cock and balls had not. The cleaning of nails comes next. Even the toe nails. If Will can be still long enough.

By the time Hannibal is finished, Will’s body will be nearly as sterile and bereft of evidence as the one downstairs, albeit whole but its presentation no less dramatic. Complicity, like the dirty water swirling around the tub will disappear right down the drain. Jack Crawford and Rinaldo Pazzi will be convinced of Hannibal’s gross disregard of subtlety where Will is concerned. A tableau of misdirection played to expectations in a symphony of subterfuge. Will’s value to Hannibal will be unquestionable and Mason Verger and the Paolini will not be able to resist grabbing Will up as soon as possible.

Hannibal takes the manicuring scissors in hand and begins with Will’s left foot as Will stares at him with glazed and half-lidded eyes from the other side of the tub. He thinks he should give his cousin a call to see how negotiations are going. Provided things are going well, Hannibal has a demand of his own to add.

Young Hannibal stumbles onto the shore ahead of Will, winded and gasping for air. He falls to his knees upon the sand and turns to Will. Will tumbles forward, ejected by the pounding waves just as breathless. He looks to Hannibal on the shore, kneeling in dry sand far from the tendrils of seaweed and the foamy tide.

You stagger like one who is dead already. Hannibal taunts, chest heaving.

In a way, I am. And so are you.

Will’s chest tightens as he stares at his wet and wind swept Achilles. The creature within coils, thoughts of the fate he contemplates for Hannibal when he seems so alive, so happy in this moment weigh uncomfortable and heavy in his gut. As though reading his thoughts, his would be Achilles calls to him as he steps unsteadily from the surf.

Your sad countenance betrays your intentions. Our Iliad is not yet written. Hannibal insists, taking Will into his arms.

Will rests his head on Hannibal’s sturdy shoulder, closes his eyes as fingers thread through his soaking wet head of hair. Will sinks into the embrace, knees upon the sand, his soul and thoughts no less naked to Hannibal than the rest of him.

There is but one Iliad, Hannibal. I have been Patroclus to your Achilles, but there is only one ending for us.

So says you. Hannibal’s fingers massage the base of his skull; the gentle repetitive motion draws from Will a burden filled sigh. He hates that he wants this…

So says I. Will frowns, taking Hannibal’s face in his hands.

Hannibal shakes off the hands that would cradle his chin and clenches them tightly to hold them in his own. He looks aside a moment and as he turns back to Will, his luminous eyes are bright. Will wonders what madness moves behind those eyes, what mischief dwells inside the impish grin.

I would argue with you Will, until the end of time. Let us argue now with tongues that taste of flesh… and rhyme.

Will laughs. Not the madness he expected from Hannibal. *What…does a rhyme taste like?*

Hannibal presses his lips against Will’s, squeezes Will’s fingers and guides reluctant hands between his legs to grasp the rod of stiffening flesh there.

Let us see what shakes out, shall we? Before your inferno takes you from me.

Why in rhyme?

Rhyme cushions words spoken harshly and in haste. Let lips do as hands do and tender sweetness from the taste.

Will strokes the swollen silk at his fingertips as he nuzzles at the warm wet lips upon his cheek and feels a smile break as his heart pounds in his chest. He feels the rhythm of Hannibal’s heart beating against his own.

Bitter or sweet, Fate does not taste the difference. Will whispers, stubbornly avoiding a rhyme.

Hannibal laughs, a glorious sound Will does not think he has ever heard, and he takes Will’s cock in his hands, draws out the length in measured strokes as Will fondles him in kind.

Since when have you played Fate? When I, the fish and you the bait?

Our eyes are opened now…Oh!

Will gasps with delight as Hannibal's fingers reach further to stroke and plunder, plunging deep into the pucker of flesh, his muscles twitch compulsively at the mere touch tensing tightly as fingers curl inside.

Neither fish nor bait swim within this stream. Will hisses, *We are but shades, a dream within a dream.* Will manages without cursing, the pleasure almost unbearable.

And is it thou, he answers, to my sight. Once more returned though from the realms of night.

Hannibal's fingers twist and tease, his tongue licks along the bed of nerves just below bottom lip and Will's eyes roll up in his head.

Agh! That golden urn, thy goddess mother gave, may mix our ashes in one common grave.

The words come spontaneously from somewhere deep in Will's memory, a memory steeped in Homer's and Hannibal's mythical epics, inseparable now and as entwined as their bodies rolling together upon the sand.

Will confesses readily to the Hannibal he holds in tight embrace, this young and beautiful imago of the monster and the man who steals Will's dreams, a thief armed with a knife. Confession is good for the soul, and Will feels a weight lifting from his chest. He pulls the young blonde Hannibal closer, leans back so they both tumble again into the sand, legs wrapped around each other, eager tongues seeking more rhymes to taste.

With Will's words, young Hannibal's face falls, the dead Patroclus' wishes having the desired effect. He raises his hips lifting Will up with him and Will grinds into him, flesh upon flesh.

Romantic, but unacceptably maudlin don't you agree? Blood and breath have ignited a fire between me and thee.

Fate has severed me from the sons of earth. The fate foretold that waited from my birth. Will quotes again from the sorrow laden verses of Patroclus' lament.

Your familiarity with our Iliad is impressive, but I…am not prepared to die. Not with you. Not even for you. No coins for the ferryman says I.

Will thinks of Don Carlo and his friend Rodrigo. Hannibal already suspects what Will hopes to do. He is playing along, using Will to accomplish his own agenda with the Paolini. Will looks into young Hannibal's face and wonders if the opportunity should present itself, could Will stand by and allow Mason to kill them both? He knows the killing will not be quick. The fear of pain pales beside the possibility of surviving should Hannibal manage to escape the Fate of Will's design.

This night my friend, so late in battle lost, Stood at my side, a pensive, plaintive ghost: Even now familiar, as in life, he came; Alas! how different! yet how like the same! Hannibal quotes. *Achilles did behold his Patroclus again as I behold you.*

And with his longing arms essay'd, in vain to grasp the visionary shade. Will returns, whispering into the warm and fragrant hair. *Beheld him yes, but he could not hold him, Hannibal.*

We agreed to storm Troy together. Neither would I wish for us to fall, separated and apart; but to leave Troy victorious would tear at my heart.

No more shattered tea cups, then; no more bloody bath. Better dead together than to suffer Achilles' wrath.

Will wants. Will wants what he cannot have…

Will slides back and forth in ecstasy, his cock nestled between warm legs tightly drawn together in a hold strong yet swathed in silky softness. Hannibal is caught between Will's legs and he moans into Will's ear, the sound plaintive, honest and raw. Hannibal jerks up from the sand and clenches Will's shoulders as he rocks. He grabs a handful of curls, eyes tightly shut and he buries his nose in the tousled mane moaning Will's name with every ragged breath he takes. Hannibal also wants what he cannot have. What Will cannot allow him to have. Can he?

You would leave me to Fate again? No consideration for my pure reverence of your thighs and your wishes, ungrateful after all our frequent kisses?

For thee too Fate waits before the Trojan wall. Even great and godlike, thou are doomed to fall. Will says, mumbling his mind fumbling, teeth clenched as pleasure tingles below.

Hannibal bites his tongue, draws blood and sucks forcefully, limbs trembling with delight beneath as Will shudders above. He wrestles his tongue from between Hannibal's teeth, draws Hannibal's tongue inside, the luscious ripple spreads like heat and Will sighs as blood courses through him, cock throbbing painfully sweet.

Hannibal gasps, pants in Will's ear, bliss so close he can hardly speak, but of course he does…

Doomed to fall am I? And yet…you squirm here between my thighs, and hope the Fates indeed tell lies.

The taste of tongue, of rhyme combines, a fluttering of heartbeats synchronous and sublime. And Will succumbs to the swell of his flesh, to the joyous eruption between muscled thighs as ocean and voice roar with the surge of the tide.

Will feels a persistent nudging at his chest. He opens his eyes to find young Hannibal, still sans chiton, resting comfortably between his naked hips and tired thighs that ache pleasantly feeling like rubber bands as Will flexes muscles and grunts lazily into Hannibal's expectant face.

Hannibal returns the grunt with a caress of bristled cheek beneath fingers that alight upon Will's skin like a flare.

Your heart sings loudly for a man seeking death; did I hear undecided indifference upon your breath?

Will looks aside and watches vines erupt from the sand, tender leaves and blossoms bright push through the glittering granules and twine along the shore twisting back…to the dunes.

No! Will cries, sitting up. *They can't go there! The garden won't grow…back there.*

He closes his eyes, feels the lump crystalize in his throat, a seed he knows will germinate and he waits for the tines of black glossy feathers to slice through his shoulders and creep along his spine.

Will. The creature you fear lives in my eyes as well; whether Troy, Baltimore, Florence; Eden or Hell.

The pain comes fresh and crisp along his back as bones crack and plumes of black feathers fan across skin. Dark wings emerge from split shoulders slowly unfolding over his head as brittle as kindling. Will feels hot breath on his cheek, a whiff of sandalwood and leather then the scent is gone, in its place floats the odor of decay.

Good and evil exist together. The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell; a hell of heaven. So it is with the garden, Will. See the garden in your inferno.

Before Will opens his eyes he knows he no longer lies on the beach happily caught in young Hannibal's embrace. He lies on the broken ground of his mind's hell, his inferno, and the red rimmed eyes of the creature bear down on him from above, its talons caress the wound that seeps blood onto the charred and ruined ground, drops of crimson all around.

Bring him back.

You can't have one without the other.

Creature Hannibal hisses into Will's ear, inclining his glossy head so tongue follows warm and wet upon Will's exposed neck.

Will turns his head into the feathers so tongue can trace up the other side; the roughness is simply maddening as the tongue presses against his throat right below his Adam's apple sending electric shivers throughout.

Playing God is becoming easier for you, isn't it?

I'm following a script already written. One that you know very well.

Tsk, Tsk. Talons click against his skull. *You would let Dante write your inferno and Homer finish our Iliad.*

Will opens his eyes. For a fraction of time he sees not the creature but Hannibal leaning over him, his dyed brown hair falls carelessly over one eye and his lips move ever so slowly but there he is.

The scaly tail flicks back and forth suggestively between his legs as feathers sweep tantalizingly soft over stiffening cock and swelling balls, arresting the waning tumescence and sending shudders along his body. The gentle sweeping pauses at his stomach and talons sharp as a razor's edge pluck at the scar and Will wriggles beneath the creature's gaze but his arms are still pinned to the gravel and he cannot move to shove the talons away. Confusion, frustration erupts and eyes burn wet. Lashes flutter in a vain attempt to focus the blurriness and Will gives up, shutting his eyes instead.

You did not intend to share your wound with me like this… Hannibal's voice sounds distant yet close, floating above him like the whispers of ghosts.

The creature's tongue darts hard and fast between his lips and Will's body lifts from the gravel in response. Will's arms struggle beneath the weight of dark wings, yet he arches his back, and his hips rise and writhe against the firm downy belly of the beast and legs already open in invitation, spread wider still. Will is pinned beneath the creature helplessly caught in its grasp and deeply aroused by his helplessness.

The tongue throbs in his mouth as rigid as a blade, thick as the tail that curls between his legs and he sucks harder, the luscious ripples break upon him like waves and he moans shamelessly.

He wants this. And he hates that he wants this…

Hot breath fills his ear. The tongue withdraws and Will groans. He stares open mouthed and breathless at the creature he both loves and despises and fears.

We are just alike. Is that Dionysus hiding in the back of your throat? Let him out. I would see you revel in what you are.

You would see me revel in what you are.

Is that what you think you've become? The mirror you made of me, for me, is not you. You deny us both.

I'm afraid…if I let it out I'll never get it back in.

The talons pinch, they pluck…they tease. Will feels the scratching of tiny needles upon his skin, scintillating and sumptuous and scathingly harsh, his nerves alive and thrumming in the shroud of sensation that seems to envelop him. Temper flares, hands curl into fists infuriated that he cannot move.

Because you fear it. Fear like impulses can be controlled. When you deny your instincts, you deny yourself happiness. Deny the beast and he will grow hungry.

I've seen the thing that crawls inside me…

You've seen glimpses with eyes full of fear. You still carry an imago of me as I carry one of you. But you carry an imago of self. An inaccurate if not unattainable ideal.

I know who I am.

Do you? Do you fear the imago you hold of me?

I carry an ideal of you. A concept of an ideal. And I know neither of us is ideal. I have always feared the ideal, but…I have admired it, too.

And what of your own? You cannot see the garden here because to see the garden is to see yourself. Your inferno is also an extension of self. Unless you are redeemed or good, you believe you can never leave. The creature huffs, and again, Will smells sandalwood and spiced leather…

We both belong in hell.

And here I am. Standing, well…right beside you. Would I be anywhere else?

Apparently not. Will scoffs, eyes locked with the dark luminous eyes that never seem to change despite whatever form Hannibal takes. *We've changed each other. I fear…that the tea cup we shattered cannot come together.*

Were it not for the lie, you would already be with me, Will.

Yes. I know.

And because you fear the change in yourself you fear the change in me?

Something like that.

Neither of us ideal, but isn't it possible that our cherished imagoes of each other are reflections of ourselves that exist in that best of all possible worlds? If you are capable of transformation so then am I. We are just alike.

This monster inside me…is part of me. I fear it. I hate it. And you…you awakened it.

And you have yet to forgive me for that. Or punish me. Still playing with that ill band of angels mixed, undecided and indifferent.

Not…indifferent. Insecure. I have made a decision, but I still question my courage to see it through.

Then have the courage to test the strength of your convictions. Allow yourself to know me again instead of comforting yourself with a selfish version me, indulging in fantasy - sex by the sea.

Lips curl at the reproach, but Will offers no rebuttal. Looking askance at the gravel and rust he notices the paw prints of his wolf in the dingy dark dust. Further on through the orange hued haze that settles like fog, pearlescent white wings flutter in the distance, gleaming slivers of naked flesh glimpsed between the branches of dead and fallen trees. Daniel…

You are preparing for battle aren't you? Creature Hannibal whispers.

The hot breath is again moist and close as pointed tongue trails along his bared throat.

So we are. Achilles and Patroclus intend to breach the walls of Troy.

And what do the Iliad and the Inferno have in common?

You refer to the sacrifice I contemplate. Isn't it love to sacrifice oneself for a greater good?

The creature pauses to consider amidst a ruffling of feathers, a click of the tongue. Taking a lock of Will's hair into its long curved talons, the creature tugs gently sending Will's tattered nerves rattling. A more insistent tug quickly follows and Will's head is lifted higher. Red rimmed eyes peer into his own, the gaze imperious, proud.

Isn't it hubris to assume your love more valid than mine? You have an opportunity to test our friendship. An opportunity to gather a shard from the shattered tea cup.

And…I'm turning my back on the first chance I get to collect a piece.

So you are. We left declarations in the poetry of our tableaux. Will you let this opportunity go to waste? Consider this, why can't you see me in the garden?

I'll think about it…

You've become too comfortable in your inferno. It is the place where you punish yourself. To leave it is to embrace your nature.

Doing bad things to bad people feels good; so punishing myself makes me feel good?

Doesn't it?

I feel the wind on the wing of madness…

Nature blooms in the garden, Will. And I would share it with you.

* * *

"Were it not for the lie, you would already be with me, Will."

A declaration of truth that wrings from lips usually silent, the weeping wound his own to bear, but here in the privacy and intimacy of his bedroom the words come without hesitation to fall as fondly as the caress on the still cheek at his fingertips. Gazing into Will's face at any given moment is pleasing, but when his eyes are closed in slumber there is one further benefit. No words are pouring out of his troublesome mouth to infuriate him.

Hannibal fluffs the towel over Will as he lies prone once again on the bed, soaking up any moisture he missed while drying him off in the bath. Will is spread out along a shower curtain, a makeshift wrapper Hannibal can roll him up in like a cigar or Mason Verger in a rug, to cart him out to the Jaguar where Will can rest comfortably beside his other passenger. His passenger will be resting there soon enough though his rest is of another kind.

Will must be perfectly dry so his skin does not attract a variety of miniscule yet telling particles from Hannibal's villa. He groans softly from time to time as Hannibal lifts and pats the freshly bathed flesh. Hannibal considers the visage and form before him, a delicate beautiful vessel of blood, breath, and bone. A predator as deadly and intelligent as himself. Demon and angel. The morning to his night.

Will had referred to himself as the prodigal son earlier for Du Maurier at his table. He is not a son in the strictest sense, but Hannibal's arms could not be opened any wider. This infuriating creature that has taunted him at every turn, has haunted him in every dream has indeed come home.

* * *

Will begins to move beside Hannibal's feet, unruly locks of hair littered with grass and bits of bark turn against his shoe. Hannibal looks down upon his naked form, the slender body twitches along the blood soaked ground as it becomes aware of itself again. Will is returning from wherever he has been for the last few hours. Hannibal tugs on the bristly ropes he holds in his hands testing the knots before easing to his knees to kneel over the semi-conscious cub dreaming in the dewy grass.

His anger at Du Maurier has cooled somewhat much like the sweat beading along his skin as he stands wearing only boxers and leather shoes in the humid Italian night. His body is stained with blood, unavoidable as he had staged his masterpiece. His clothes sit some distance away, far from the reach of splatter.

A strange sensation indeed to watch another sink a syringe into Will's flesh. Stranger still to allow her to get away with it, if only temporarily. His mind had processed the scene unfolding before him with cold detachment and yet within, the rage had smoldered like ashen coals in his chest. How fortunate for her that her brazen and admittedly clever ruse can be reimagined and incorporated into his design.

The sheer boldness of the maneuver was as audacious as the glittering gold and crushed diamonds she wears around her neck. Sending her to Uncle Jack with his blessing had been too fortuitous to resist. Hannibal had practically put the plane ticket she desires in her hands, and then snatched it away. She really should be more careful. To have the temerity to presume to preach to Will… Hannibal tuts aloud as he rolls his tired shoulders. Will would find the irony as amusing as Hannibal were he not passed out on the ground.

Adam in the garden. Fallen Titan splayed among the rocks. Will has no idea…

Hannibal squints in the direction of the eastern horizon as he peels off his work gloves. He doesn't need to use them with Will. Leaving fingerprints upon his work here is redundant, tantamount to… well, Michelangelo scrawling his name across the Sistine Chapel. No one will be in doubt as to whose masterpiece this is.

Discovering where the masterpiece was conceived and created will prove much more difficult. Will is going to have to interpret the evidence here convincingly and, it is Hannibal's design that Will be as surprised as everyone else.

Morning breaks early in the Italian summer. Before the rose colored fire spreads across the sky he must leave Will and his design here. It is time for Patroclus to set Greeks and Trojans against one another, time to rid the garden of the viper, time for tea cup to gather itself together.

Will struggles at his feet trying to sit up. The paralytic has almost worn off and the hallucinatory effects of Du Maurier's twilight cocktail will continue to erode. Will's eyes open and he gazes up at Hannibal, uncomprehending pools of blue glisten at Hannibal's feet. Hannibal kneels down beside him grazing Will's skin with silken boxers and observing the slight tremor that follows. Will is regaining sensation, too. By the time the FBI arrives, he will no longer feel numb and he should be able to speak. Hannibal thinks he may be able to speak already as he watches Will wet his lips, the dryness likely intolerable but dehydration is only one of the unfortunate side effects Will will be dealing with.

"Will…" Hannibal places a finger on petal soft lips.

Will blinks, repeatedly, as he sorts through the voices in his head that soar like a breath of wind on the wings of madness… Achilles speaks again to his Patroclus.

You have no consideration for my pure reverence of your thighs or your wishes, ungrateful after all our frequent kisses.

Please…Let my pale corpse the rites of burial know, and give entrance to the realms below.

Hannibal looks into the face of the being that brings forth the best and worst in him, the one being capable of causing him delight and pain in equal measure, sometimes simultaneously, and he takes that face in his hands, smooths his thumbs over arched brows to trail along the stubbly jaw. Eyelids flicker but half lidded and unfocused as they are, Hannibal has no choice but to hope Will is lucid enough to listen. His mind will make the connections later. He will be emotionally uninhibited. Strong emotions will help him remember.

"Will. Look at me…good. Achilles and Patroclus did not finish dinner. Do you remember dinner?"

Brows furrow beneath his thumb as Hannibal smooths the pucker of flesh there and features slacken in repose once again. He touches a finger to the pliant lower lip, sliding the finger to one side of the slippery mouth and then the other and he smiles as the head turns slightly to trail the finger while the tongue searches for the nub of flesh. He pushes his finger against the bottom row of teeth and his smile grows wider still as Will closes his lips around the finger, drawing it in.

The body remembers its conditioning. Will's oral fixation remains a source of enchantment. He is in an emotionally secure place in his mindscape, but Hannibal needs him here for a few minutes before sending him back to wherever Will goes. He pulls his finger from the moist mouth leaving lips to smack then pucker at the abruptness. He places two fingers in Will's hand.

"The circumstances of your present condition were unintended but not entirely unexpected. A viper protecting her nest is easily provoked. Squeeze my fingers if you understand."

Young Hannibal blows the sand from Will's fingers before placing them in his mouth. He sucks thoughtfully for a moment smiles as Will pulls them from his lips, kissing the tips as Will dips his fingers into his mouth again. Hannibal turns his head aside and Will's fingers fall. He follows Hannibal's gaze to look at his rendering of the siege of Troy at their feet in the sand. Only two warriors breach the hallowed walls, their likenesses unavoidably recognizable.

Dearest Will, Hannibal says, wrapping his hand around Will's fingers, *with happy heart I hold a mirror out to thee; and my wayward goose, he looks; but alas…he does not see.*

"Will…squeeze if you understand."

Hannibal waits while Will's fingers coil slightly around his fingers and flex around them once as pale blue eyes struggle to remain open, desperate to focus. Will has some gross motor control; the finer is not quite up to snuff. The sedative Du Maurier gave him has lasted the several hours she had said it would, likely helped along by exhaustion. Will's tendency to avoid sleep is a habit Hannibal knows well. The effects of the sedative have been gradually wearing off as Hannibal has worked but he needs to handle Will with care.

Will swallows and grunts testing his vocal chords and out comes the tongue, tentatively touching teeth as thoughts attempt to traverse from brain to mouth. Hannibal suspects words, like associations will tumble soon enough as Will's hands move across clumsily over his chest.

"My…clothes…" Will spits out the words with concentrated effort.

"I took them off, remember?" Hannibal takes Will's wrists gently in hand and eases them to the ground.

"Nuh…Nuh…Uh uh…"

Hannibal moves in a blur above him and though Will's eyes track his movements he cannot follow for very long before the relentless heaviness of his lids causes them to shut again. Hannibal took his clothes off?

"Yes. Be still."

Hannibal does not mean to be curt, but time is of the essence and Will is still someplace else. He will likely not remember this conversation any more than the other words actually exchanged between them. Will has not been present with him for several hours now, yet is now able to engage in conversation while still interacting with his hallucination. Endlessly fascinating…his Will.

“All…all my clothes?” Will’s hands begin to search his body again. Hannibal sighs.

“Yes, Will.” Will’s eyes close and his mouth twists in a grimace as Hannibal’s answer is confirmed. “My design requires a…classical element.” A pause and then, “May I continue?”

Without waiting for an answer, Hannibal grabs an ankle and clicks the metal bracelet in place. He moves to Will’s other leg, positions it and secures that bracelet as well. Will flinches. He trembles at Hannibal’s touch, his mind holding him captive elsewhere, perhaps a place more terrible to him than even this.

“I’m outside.” Will’s fingers claw clumsily in the moist dirt beneath him.

Hannibal pauses to stoop over Will. He grabs the hands he just spent an hour grooming and sets them on Will’s chest.

“Will. Leave your hands there for a moment.”

“The ground…is wet.”

“Yes, it is. You may feel uncomfortably cold as sensation returns. But not for long.”

Will touches his stomach, stares at his fingers in wonderment, “I’m sticky.”

Eyes roll upward slowly and Hannibal watches Will’s face slacken in the shadows as associations slam into his skull and the soft mouth opens in protest. “What… did you…do to me?”

“To you? Nothing…much.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrow at the thought, but he collects a cloth from the leather bag at his side and commences to clean Will’s hands, again. So infuriating…his Will.

When the time comes, will you hand me over to Mason; or will you hand him to me?

Will cringes beneath a canopy of wings, a shroud of feathers, as the creature shreds its talons along his skin, scraping off his feathers from him as easily as wiping off grime. Blood, slick and thick paints his limbs and torso. His stomach feels greasy and cool, the night air causing goosebumps to rise along his flesh.

Let it out, Will.

Not like this…

Let it all the way out. Reveal yourself. It’s the only way you can leave your inferno. Stripped of indifference.

I’m not indifferent!

“Your mind is drifting again.” Hannibal says, noticing the vacant expression.

Will swallows, gulps down silence, considering Hannibal’s words as his dreamscape continues to disrupt his thoughts, his consciousness trudges from one plane of reality to another, back and forth. Dread and panic threaten to overwhelm like stones in his throat he could dislodge with one heaving sob but he holds the stones tight where they are.

Hannibal considers if Will is lucid enough for conversation he can accommodate him. He may even lie still.

“What was that poem you recited once upon a time…Blake was it?”

Will concentrates, plucks the moment from the memory palace he shares with Hannibal and like an errant dandelion he scatters to the wind the words billow softly through his mind.

“I…think…*Broken Love*…it was called.”

“Could you recite it now?”

“Oh…kay…”

Will remembers sitting in the salon in Baltimore, Hannibal at his harpsichord swinging his long legs around the bench to face Will. Will sees the pages swimming with print in his mind as he recites to Hannibal looming somewhere above…behind him… “I…can’t remember all of it”

“It’s a long poem, several verses. Just recite what you can.”

Will thinks, concentrates on seeing the words lift from the pages in his mind.

“What transgressions I commit are for thy transgressions fit. They thy harlots, thou their slave; and my bed becomes their grave.”

Will’s tongue trips over the words but he manages to finish the verse. He stops his recitation to look at his arms now stretched over his head. His eyes move along the length of one arm to finally look up into Hannibal’s face and his brow creases with questions Hannibal is disinclined to answer. Hannibal prompts Will with the next verse instead, keeping his mind occupied.

*“*Never, never, I return: Still for victory I burn. Living, thee alone I’ll have; And when dead I’ll be thy grave.”Hannibal says. “Now you…”

Will picks up the next line, stumbling over words as before. “Through the Heaven and Earth and Hell Thou shalt never, quell: I will fly and thou pursue: Night and morn the flight renew.”

Alike but not the same. Equals but opposites, complimentary opposites. The way the sun chases the moon and night consumes the day.

Daniel’s words pop like a flashbulb into Will’s head as he mumbles Blake’s verse. He had been talking about Hannibal’s perception of their relationship, likening Will to Zeus’ Nemesis. Hannibal had not plucked this particular poem out of thin air. Everything Hannibal does is deliberate. Associations grow like vines, attaching and twisting and turning through dark and dismal landscapes, the polluted jungle of his mind.

Hannibal works quickly while Will is engaged, fastening thick metal around each of Will’s wrists and then drawing the attached chain through the spikes in the ground. He pulls the chain taut so that Will’s form is beautifully splayed, if not a little contorted. Uncle Jack will be speechless.

“I can’t…remem…any…What…is…this?”

Will tugs at the chains, closes his eyes and gasps with the effort. Still too sedated to resist, but not for much longer. Hannibal does not want to administer yet another shot, but he may have to knock

Will out with Ketamine once more. A very small dose, just enough to put him to sleep and delay complete consciousness a little longer. When he wakes up, the effects of the benzodiazepines should be nearly gone.

Hannibal returns to Will's feet, knots the chain extending to Will's left leg, the one that will be visible upon the approach of the would be rescuers, to shorten its length, keeping Will's leg bent at the knee at a sharper angle, effectively obscuring his privates within the black tangle of hair, affording Will some semblance of dignity from the point of approach. The FBI will take plenty of pictures, but photographs taken front and center of both figures in his tableau will be tasteful and elegant. As they should be.

He could drape a cloth or towel over Will; there is blood red draping between the legs of the figure displayed in the painting that inspires this pose, but Will is so exquisite that Hannibal cannot bring himself to sacrifice even one inch to modesty. Will's or his own.

He arranges the other leg and then lastly, he turns Will's head to the left, so he faces outward and away from the tree at his right and toward the direction of the impending sunrise and the FBI.

"Will… Tsk. Tsk. If I tell you it will spoil the surprise. You have appearances to maintain. And…I promise you will make quite the appearance."

Hannibal stoops low and intending to offer reassurance, cradles Will's head in his hand as he used to, caresses the soft curls behind his ear and the nape of his neck. He is unprepared for the immediate misting of Will's pale blue eyes.

We couldn't leave without you…

Hannibal's eyes close with the realization that Will has fixated on the last time Hannibal held him like this and is recalling those moments right now. Associations do come quickly for Will and apparently, intensely. Though the layers of sedation have long since reached their saturation point, Will's emotional responses are unrestrained. Hannibal withdraws his hand allowing Will's head to fall back to the ground.

"Trust is not a rose that blooms easily in our garden, is it?" Hannibal murmurs.

Pale blue eyes glisten and tremulous lips part, but Will does not answer preferring instead to blink and look away. Hannibal watches a single tear collect in the corner of one eye and he takes it up quickly with a finger and brings it to his own lips, the movement, like the bead of an arrow is tracked by pale blue eyes. He looks into Will's face as the salty drop dissolves on his tongue. Will's expression does not change but the intermittent tears trickle nonetheless.

"Will…" His name is uttered softly, and Will's chest tightens in response.

"And throughout all eternity…I forgive you, you forgive me." Hannibal says, reciting a line from the last verse of Blake's poem.

I wanted to surprise you and you…wanted to surprise me.

Will mumbles incoherently into the dirt and leaves. A gentle prompt of fingers to his chin causes him to look up from the ground. Pale lashes blink with patience as the hooded eyes look down at him. Will knows by the expression on Hannibal's face that he too had been remembering just now, existing with him in the halls of the memory palace they share.

“I’m thirsty.” Will says after a moment.

“You are dehydrated. But I can’t give you anything. This will be over soon.”

Will rolls his head and sniffs the dirt and green leaves. Hannibal immediately rolls his head back in place, stays his hand to rest a moment upon the stubborn head. Will sighs in resignation and wonders where they are. It is still dark though the sky is painted in soft hues of pink and gold. Will thinks he can make out the shapes of shrubs and trees. He could be imagining it. He thinks he is in the garden with Hannibal. But he is not interacting with a disembodied voice in his head; he can *see* him this time… He tries to focus on the sights and smells around him rather than the hands moving over his body.

Hannibal is checking his vitals, *or his vittles*. Laughter threatens, but Will’s throat is too raw.

I am flying on the wings of madness… Will clucks his pasty tongue and swallows what feels like another mouthful of sand.

“Han…ni…bal…” The syllables stick in his throat. “Puh…lease, a drink.

“Will…” Hannibal strokes a wet cheek, “I cannot.”

With one hand he holds Will’s wrist, looking at his watch while listening to Will breathe. Will’s breathing is regular but labored and Hannibal imagines he would be quite uncomfortable if not for the drugs. Pulmonary failure and myocardial depression are risk factors with sedatives, but Will’s heart remains strong. He reaches behind for the small medical pouch and takes out the prepared syringe, removes the cap and leans into Will’s ear.

“When you wake up, this will all make sense to you.”

“No…” Will hisses, knowing what’s coming.

Hannibal massages Will’s scalp a couple seconds, luxuriating in the silkiness. “I have great faith in you, Will. I always have. I trust that my faith is not misplaced…this time.”

Hannibal injects Will with another syringe, a carefully pre-measured dose of the fast acting Ketamine. The needle goes into the same puncture left by Du Maurier’s assault. He watches the eyelids flutter and the grim line of Will’s mouth slackens. He will pass out again in less than thirty seconds and will remain sedated for about ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Then, he will doze on his own until external stimuli, like the arrival of the FBI wakes him up. The effects of the other unnamed sedatives or hypnotics will continue to degrade. Will’s fatty tissue has absorbed and metabolized the dose Du Maurier gave him over the last several hours. It reached its peak efficacy some time ago. Hannibal need only offer the appearance of deep sedation for Jack. And Pazzi.

“It won’t be long now, Will. Sleep. Walk in the garden.”

Hannibal watches the shoulders slump as Will’s body relaxes. He should be out until the FBI arrives, awaking shortly after they find him bound and beautifully arranged at the foot of Hannibal’s design. Hannibal corrects himself. Will is part of the design. Hannibal removes the GPS tracker from his shirt pocket. The tracker that now has his fingerprint alongside Du Maurier’s. He places it in front of Will and turns it on.

His clothes, trousers and pullover tee, are damp but clean. He dresses quickly, glancing at the gurgling Neptune under the veil of stars. Hannibal lugs his duffle bag of supplies over his shoulder and makes his way quickly to the van so thoughtfully provided by the Boboli Gardens. He will drive back around the Via del Forte di San Giorgio and leave it near the Piazza della Calza, south of the gardens where he left the Jaguar. The lot was empty when he arrived and he is confident it still is. The Boboli Gardens do not open to the public until after eight. Hannibal has a leisurely three hours before then.

He takes out Will's phone, scrolls through until he finds the number he seeks. He selects and waits.

"Uhg… Thank God. Will?" The hoarse voice mumbles into the phone.

"Hello, Jack." Hannibal has not heard this voice in a long time and decides he has missed Jack's throaty rumble. "Sorry to wake you."

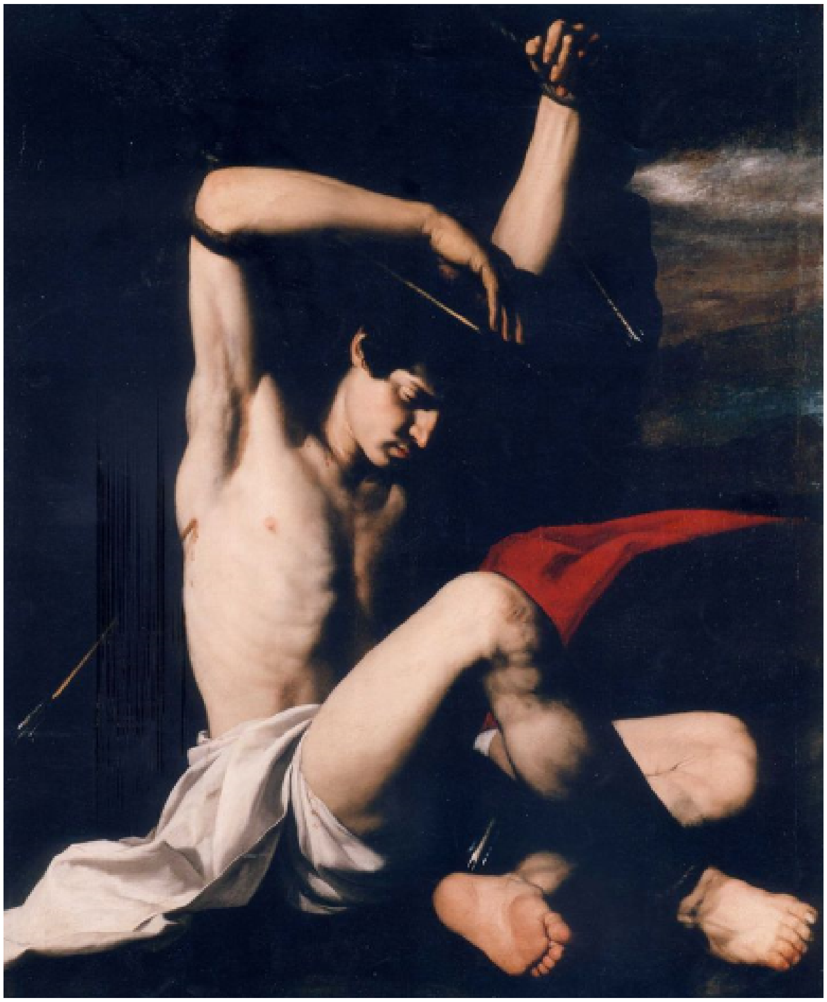
"Hah…Hannibal?" Silence for an interminable moment as Jack processes. Hannibal knows what Jack fears. "What the…where's Will?"

"Will can't come to the phone right now. Bedelia said I should call you first. She sends her regards."

"Where is Will? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

"Goodbye, Jack."

Hannibal clicks off the phone and continues toward the piazza. He considers where he might stop for breakfast on the way back to Impruneta. Hannibal is famished. He thinks perhaps he should drop off Will's belongings first. He's going to need his phone back. Doctor Clayton must be worried sick.



Saint Sebastian, Antonio de Bellis, c.1650

The sun peeks above the branches of Cypress trees outside as Jack Crawford pushes through the exit doors of Palazzo Pitti to traverse the short walk to the avenue leading to the amphitheater. Price and Zeller follow behind, the only FBI agents Jack brought with him. Jack only called headquarters moments ago, allowing him plenty of time to get to Will first and manage his emotions depending on what he finds.

Pazzi is also on his way. The Polizia captain had been brusque on the phone, especially after Jack had bombarded him with questions, ending the call abruptly with a clipped "Ciao."

They reach the perimeter of this section of the lush Boboli Gardens and Jack stops to look around the amphitheater.

"Well…where is he?"

Price and Zee halt in their tracks. Zee turns around to Jack, phone in hand.

"This is the amphitheater. We need to go to the pond. Maybe another five minutes." Price says.

"Jack, I said *Fontana Forcone*. This isn't even a fountain." Zee says looking up at the Egyptian Obelisk towering overhead.

“I couldn’t understand *what* you said. I speak Italian. Pitchfork as in Trident?”

“Uh, yeah. Neptune’s pitchfork… Florentines take credit for inventing the fork…”

“Stop trying to show off. Not today…” Jack says, already huffing toward the next tier.

The Boboli Gardens comprise a triangle of green in the south of Florence. The sloping garden was built on the hills behind the Palazzo Pitti, excavated for the stone used to build the palazzo. Boboli became the quintessential model of the formal garden for all of Europe from the Sixteenth century onward. Bank rolled by the Medici, four different architects designed the gardens, Giorgio Vasari, famous for his *Lives of the Artists*, was one of them.

Among Boboli’s many charming qualities are the grottoes and hidden pathways littered throughout the meandering trails of statues, grottoes, and museums. Jack Crawford is hoping Hannibal did not deposit this latest nightmare too far off the beaten track he now follows in a direct line to the terrace directly above the amphitheater where Neptune, his pitchfork and his pond await.

“He should be right around here, Jack.” Zee says as they emerge from the tree lined entrance to the terrace, halting in front of Neptune’s Statue that rises from the center of the algae corroded pond.

Neptune stands sleek and wet poised atop the moss covered rocks in the center of the pond embedded with wailing sea sirens and armed with his trident. The surrounding grounds are a field of green grass, nothing obstructing the view ahead.

Jack sees nothing but the carefully pruned and spaced trees that encircle the pond. He scratches at whiskers in need of his attention, opens his mouth to berate Price or Zeller, it doesn’t matter which.

“Oh…God. Oh…fuck…” Price’s voice cracks from behind. “Which one is Will?”

“Behind you, Jack. The tree line…” Zee says quietly looking into Jack’s face as he turns around, eyes alert and searching.

“Ahh. Jesus Fucking Christ…”

Zeller runs his hands repeatedly through the frizz of curls, helplessly frozen to the spot. Price looks to his feet, clears his throat…repeatedly.

Jack's eyes immediately focus on a grove of trees along the perimeter. Two brunette figures recline beneath the middle tree, one leans against the trunk, the other lies prone at his feet. All three men break into a run at the same time. They had walked right past the terrible tableau.

Jack slows his approach, teeth clenched tight in an effort to stymie the sting of moisture accumulating in his eyes. He stops and allows Price and Zeller to go ahead. He tells himself he has always known it could end this way. One day Will would put his head too far into the lion’s mouth. Jack tells himself that maybe this is better than watching Will lose his mind. Will is broken and though Jack is acutely aware of his role in the breaking, it doesn’t change the facts. Jack has taken it for granted that Will would never let Lecter go. He has more than taken Will for granted, he has taken advantage of his obsession with Lecter.

But, Jack has never had to twist his arm to do it. Jack tells himself that at least he won’t have to watch Will disintegrate before his eyes in some institution. At least he won’t have to hunt Will as he hunts Lecter now. Jack takes a deep breath and walks closer.

The sight is jaw dropping. The eyes cannot fix on any one facet of this most cruel jewel in Hannibal's crown. Price stands motionless, mute. Zeller drops to his knees beside the still and starkly naked body of their friend, Will Graham, too stunned to even put on his gloves at the moment.

The ground is stained red all around. A trail of organs extends from the nude body of Ruggerio slumped against the tree to Will.

Jack stares at the masterpiece, and it is a masterpiece. If Cassie Boyle was field kabuki then Hannibal has elevated his stagecraft considerably. He has presented a confounding juxtaposition of form and imagery, and with a flair for theatricality. The tableaux of the Paolini were grotesque and intentionally shocking and demeaning. This tableau is a monument to classicism in every sense.

The tableau faces east and like a curtain going up, the rising sun streams light casting the figures in stark relief, accentuating shadow so the contrast of dark and light across the musculature of the bodies is delineated in such a way as to appear like marble rather than flesh. The effect is mesmerizing, the dramatic lighting lends a surreal quality to the tableau. It is difficult to tell if the figures are dead or statues. Except for the blood, of course.

Detective Ruggerio is pinned to the trunk of the tree, his torso and arms pierced by arrows that Lecter forced through his young flesh at various angles. The arrows are not enough to hold Ruggerio fast. His arms have been posed over his head, bound by ropes and suspended from spikes driven into the tree. His eyes are closed and his head hangs forward, locks of brown hair brushing his forehead, his demeanor and pose penitent as though in prayer. He sits in a pool of his own blood, legs folded beneath him and his organs trail from his body on a slight incline away from the tree to Will's body.

Will is likewise bathed in sunlight, but for the blood smeared across his stomach, and the curious inclusion of long black feathers scattered around, his body appears as carved and polished stone. He lies on his back, limbs extending out so every muscle is attenuated. Arms are raised over his head, and posed in elegant curves; the manacles around his wrists are attached to chains held in place with spikes. The left knee facing out is bent at ninety degree angle and the other leg is draped over a large rock Jack is certain Lecter brought with him specifically as a prop. Both legs are manacled at the ankle and chained to the ground with spikes. Will's torso is pulled taut by the placement of his extremities. The ribcage is distended, stomach depressed and hips raised slightly. The position is unnatural and contorted, but visually stunning. Lecter has deliberately posed Will like this for the sheer aesthetic beauty of the human form.

The expression is so peaceful Will looks like he is asleep. Will's skin tone still seems flush and his lips are not blue… Jack wonders if maybe Will had still been alive when Lecter called… He doesn't really look…dead. Hope begins to blossom in Jack.

"Tell me that's not Will's liver."

Jack nods to the reddish brown shapeless viscera lying on the ground beside Will's body as though it had just slipped out of the wound Jack is convinced Hannibal reopened.

Zeller swallows and pulls on his gloves. "Wait a sec." Zeller bends low and touches Will's chest. Will's body is warm, and as Zee bends down closer so that his ears nearly touch Will's lips Zeller realizes something else.

"It's not his. He's breathing, Jack. He's alive."

“Are you…?” Jack starts as Price breaks into a grin so wide Zee is certain his face must hurt.

“Sure? Fuck, yeah. Oh my God.” Zeller’s eyes widen as he takes in the staged pose before him. “He’s been drugged, out cold, but he’s alive.”

“So, that’s not his liver.” Jack states, deadpan with relief. A smile breaks across his face as well.

“Ruggerio’s” Price says, stepping away from the pale corpse suspended from the tree. “The blood and organs are all his.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well, I’m going out on a limb here but…if Will is breathing…” Price says.

“Then, what the fuck am I looking at?” Jack snaps. “Let’s get some pictures before Pazzi’s people start crawling all over the place. Ruggerio is one of theirs. This is going to get ugly.”

“Shouldn’t we, uh, cover Will up?” Zee says, his face twisted in sympathy.

“He’s part of the crime scene, part of the tableau. Can’t.” Jack says.

Zeller and Price exchange glances before retrieving cameras from duffle bags. It takes barely a minute for them to capture the tableau from multiple angles.

“This poses some problems, Jack.” Zee says.

“Tell me about it.”

“He’s part of the tableau, but he can’t stay here.” Price says. “He needs to go to a hospital…again. Jesus, how many times has he…”

“Too many, I know. We’re not going to move him until after he regains consciousness anyway.”

“We’re not?”

“You want him to wake up…to this?”

“He’s evidence. Lecter left us a living tableau – at least half of it. Will’s reaction is as much evidence as anything else.” Jack says.

“That’s…pretty cold, Jack.” Zee says.

“We have to consider every angle here.” Jack says, gestures to Ruggerio. “The Polizia will be out for blood. Will should be dead and they will want to know why he isn’t and their guy is.”

Jack has his own reasons for keeping Will right where he is despite the embarrassment and humiliation waking up like this is bound to cause him. Will’s reaction will be spontaneous. Unrehearsed. Not even Hannibal could manipulate him with hypnosis in this short amount of time. Hannibal left him alive and Jack wants to know why. How easily guilt and remorse give way to suspicion and skepticism. Plenty of time to berate himself later when Will’s story does *not* contradict the evidence.

“The longer we keep this in context the better. I want to see what Will does. I want to hear what he says while he is here not in a hospital bed looking at pictures later.”

“I’ll get started on samples from Will.” Zee says.

“And I’ll stick with Ruggerio. This pose reminds me of a martyred saint. Which one died like this?”

“Shit, Price…lots of them I’d imagine. I’m Jewish, how would I know?”

“No excuse. Christianity is one of the roots of Western Civilization.”

“Christianity is rooted in Judaism.”

“Don’t…” Jack interrupts. “Just…don’t. And, no conjecture about what this all this…art shit means. Keep your thoughts to yourselves. Don’t share with the Polizia either. They can run with their own evidence. Let Will explain it his way, first. Am I clear?”

Price and Zeller both nod at their boss. They wait until Jack turns around to take out their phones and start texting each other.

Jack looks around at the pond and its environs. The Garden is still deserted, but not for long. It’s almost six and the Garden opens at eight. The staff have already been informed, and he as he looks down at the amphitheater he can see the jackets of the Polizia officers swarming as they cordon off the exit from the terrace there. Wonderful that Pazzi will be joining them any minute. When Will wakes up, he is going to wish he was dead.

If this doesn’t send Will running to his therapist… Jack’s stomach gives a lurch as he remembers he promised to call Doctor Clayton. Clayton must be worried sick…

Daniel is throwing fresh clothes for Will in a gym bag along with some toiletries when his phone rings again. He just hung up to Jack Crawford and can’t imagine who would be calling him this early. His office knows about his temporary assignment with the FBI and it’s too early for them to even be at the office at this hour. Crawford’s call had startled him from a dreamless slumber, a sound sleep he had not enjoyed nearly long enough. But, although the news about Will had been a mixed bag of information with a healthy dose of omission, Daniel has not stopped smiling since he hung up the phone. Will was found alive. That is all that matters.

Although Crawford had said he was still unconscious, he had been confident Will would be admitted to Ospedali di Carregi within the next couple hours. Crawford had been less forthcoming about Detective Ruggerio. Other than Ruggerio and Will had been found together in a joint tableau, and only Will was alive, is all Crawford would tell him.

He looks at the caller ID. Confusion descends. It is his office.

“Hello?”

“Buongiorno, Doctor Clayton. I’m so sorry to call you this early, but I have to ask you a favor.” Maria's cheery voice blares.

“A favor? What are you doing at the office so early?”

“Oh well, your temporary replacement, Doctor Lorenzo decided to stagger the hours. She is keeping a very full schedule and we sort of got behind while you were scaling back your practice before you took your sabbatical, eh?”

“You mean you guys were slacking off.” Daniel grins into the phone.

“Maybe a little. Anyway…I come in at six. Constanzia will be in at seven.”

“What’s the favor?’

“Well, it’s actually for one of your patients…”

“One of my patients? Lorenzo should have taken my…which patient?” Daniel’s heart skips a beat. *NO. No. No. He wouldn’t dare…*

“Victor Boucher. He wanted to know if you could meet him here on your way downtown. Said he had something for you.”

Daniel cringes. He is certain all his blood just drained from his face. His mind begins to reel and the floor becomes unsteady beneath his feet. He has never felt so disoriented in his life.

“What…what time did he…?” He manages.

“Well, I don’t know. I could ask him.”

“He’s…already there?”

“Standing right here.”

Daniel swallows…hard. Clears his throat. His hands are shaking. “Let me talk to him, please?”

“Sure, just a minute…Doctor Boucher? Doctor Clayton would like to talk to you…”

Daniel is sweating now as he waits. He paces across the bedroom, back and forth. He is still unnerved by the voice at the other end even though he knew it was coming.

“Doctor Clayton. Buongiorno. Do you have a minute?” Hannibal purrs into the phone.

Silence.

“Doctor Clayton…are you there?’

“I’m…here.” Daniel finally breathes.

“Seems I have surprised you. Well, surprises are the spice of life, aren’t they?”

Hannibal waits for Clayton to collect himself. This is, after all, very stressful for him.

“What…can I do for you…Doctor *Boucher*?”

“As your lovely office manager, Maria, explained, I have something for you and would like to give it to you personally. If it’s not too much trouble.”

Hannibal nods and smiles at the pleasant and plump office assistant. She smiles back just as pleasantly, brushing salt and pepper hair out of her face.

“At my…office?” Daniel almost stutters. *This is not happening. This is not happening.*

“You would be doing me a great courtesy and by extension be helping a mutual friend.”

“I’m on my way.” Daniel gulps.

What choice does he have? Hannibal is polite, but Daniel does not doubt the menace that lurks behind the façade of pleasantries. Although, Daniel has to admit that Hannibal sounds agreeable. And no wonder. After what Jack Crawford told him, Hannibal must be ecstatic.

“Wonderful. Thank you for being so accommodating.”

“Sure…”

“And Doctor Clayton?”

“Yes?”

“If I could impose…bring some breakfast?” Hannibal wishes he could see Clayton’s expression.

“Uh…you’re s…s…serious?” Daniel stutters. He never stutters. Not since he was a kid.

“Of course. I’ve been up for a while working. Built up an appetite, I’m afraid. Of course, if you take too long I might be tempted to eat here. Perhaps invite the lovely Maria to join me.” Hannibal winks at Maria.

“I'll be there.” Daniel gulps again. His throat is dry as dust. “What…would you like me to pick up?”

“Surprise me. I’ll be expecting you.”

The call ends and Daniel sinks into the mattress, legs trembling so badly he cannot stand up. He’s amazed he didn’t piss himself. He eyes the bottle of Glenlivet on the nightstand and dismisses the idea. He has to go meet Hannibal at his office. He can’t call Jack Crawford. He has to pull himself together. He is on his own. He stands up and rubs sweaty palms along his trousers. He takes controlled breaths as he checks the bag he packed for Will one more time.

Soon, he is cruising along the highway to Florence. As he drives he wonders what *does* one pick up for a sophisticated cannibal for breakfast.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 72
The dialogue actually quoted between Young Hannibal and Will is lifted from Book XXIII of The Iliad by Homer and from passages in The Achilleis by Aeschylus
And some is written in the style of the Samuel Butler translation of Homer's Iliad found on the

Gutenberg Project website;
“A breath of wind on the wing of madness.” Charles Baudelaire, Fleurs du Mal
Broken Love, William Blake (1757 – 1827)
“The mind is its own place…” Paradise Lost, John Milton

Also, this marks one year that I have posting this story! Thanks for reading!

Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

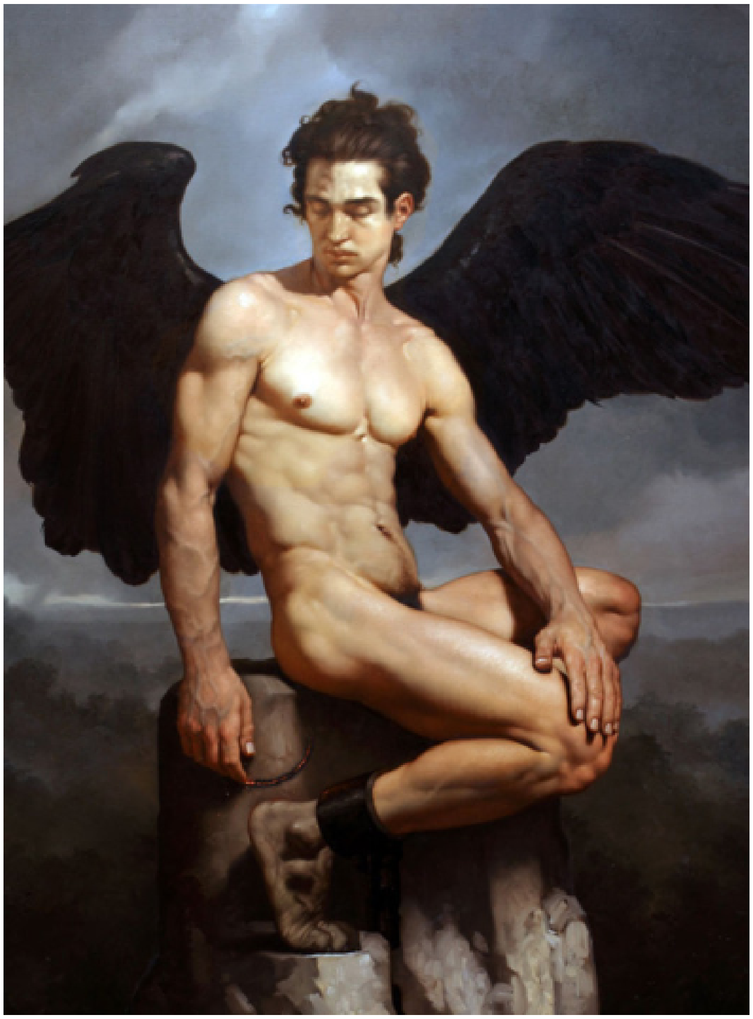
> Will regains consciousness and finds himself in an indelicate position.
>
> “But, he has humiliated you. Treated you with contempt.” Pazzi waves his hand over the discarded shackles and the blood soaked ground.
>
> “If that’s what you’re reading into this, you are wrong. Actually, he treated me and Ruggerio with respect. At least to his thinking. Arranging bodies, dead or alive, is not disrespectful to God. His judgement conveyed by the arrangement and treatment of the meat. This…” Will waves his arm in a sweeping gesture, “is merely material to do with as he pleases.”
>
> Pazzi’s large dark eyes engage Will’s, searchingly, so intensely that Will looks away. “You really did get into his head, didn’t you? You don’t just talk about him, you speak from his mind.”
>
> “Rinaldo, I became him.” Will says softly. “Don’t think for a minute that I can ever forget that.” And neither should you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 73

Will regains consciousness and finds himself in an indelicate position.



Lucifero, Roberto Ferri

La plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas. (*The devil's finest trick is to persuade you that he does not exist.*)

Les Fleurs du Mal, Boudelaire

Will lies nude on his back, scented breezes sweep through legs opened to receive nature's soothing embrace. He rests, elbows bent behind him, cradling his head as he reclines in the cool soft grass, staring up at a canopy of leaves speckled with a smattering of blue sky. His thoughts drift like the clouds, here and then gone as he lies in the exquisite perfect garden of his dreams ever aware of the barren landscape that skirts the verdant paradise if he looks in that direction.

He doesn't look.

Napping? Hannibal's voice purrs in his head.

Thinking.

Have you figured out why you do not see me here? I see you, Will.

Arms unfold to restlessly search the ground for green blades to tug in frustration. Adam is never really alone in the garden, is he?

He ignores Hannibal's question. He doesn't have an answer for him anyway.

I was thinking about God. And Adam. If God could walk and talk in the garden with Adam, enjoyed the company of his creation so much, why did he create Eve for him?

The good book would tell us it was because Adam was lonely. For man himself; no partner could be found.

But, of course, that could not be so. How could there be loneliness when he walked with God? Will's lips twitch with barely restrained amusement. *God was…curious what would happen?*

Curious about a great many things. The voice seems to alight like a kiss upon his ears and it spread warm across cheeks turning twitch to tender smile. *His creation imbued with similar inquisitiveness. He gave Adam choices.*

Choices? Women are not trees. He introduced corporeal companionship. Adam was made of much baser material much too fragile and delicate to hold the divine.

Sarcasm is seldom silent in you. It is too often a weapon in your hands; and wielded by a mouth too sweet to be spoiled by salt that would sorely wound. You think God did not touch Adam?

Not the way he wanted. Will teases, grinning up at the sky.

He feels a whisper of breeze about his lips, a gentle ruffling of his hair as the touch of spectral fingers seems to nestle there. Will stretches along the grass luxuriating in the tickle of the blades along his skin, the refreshing cool of the shaded dirt beneath.

And yet, God did not fashion Eve from the same clay he molded Adam. Neither did God breathe life into Eve; she was taken from Adam's own flesh. Hannibal's voice hums on the wind.

He created one being from clay and drew from his flesh another like being. Don't tell me God didn't plan on procreation. He set Adam and Eve up for their fall. Babies don't come from innocence.

In his omniscience God could see multiple possible worlds. The choice was Adam's.

Will marvels how thin the veil between Hannibal's perception of God and of himself. *Did God prefer a particular outcome then, a preferred world?*

God was at first content to observe. Adam became his passion; Eve was but a variable in a complex equation.

Did God place her there, a vessel of temptation?

God created good and evil. A shift of the wind, a trembling of branches overhead, *Like the trees of life and knowledge planted in the garden, he offered one kind of existence and another. To prompt Adam to move beyond his limitations. To see the negative and the positive of both.*

If I remember, fingers ply petulant lips as Will stares up at the heavens, …*he was punished for moving beyond his limitations.* Will says, grinning and wondering why he looks up when he should be looking down.

Only because he chose the wrong tree, remember? Hannibal chides.

Succumbed to the wrong temptation. Yes. Poor ignorant, innocent Adam.

Ignorance is not bliss. Innocence can never last.

Adam can certainly attest to that.

Will feels a tickling along his scalp, then through his hair and he swats at the wind, but he knows he'll find no insect there.

Tsk, Tsk. Adam was bound to disobey; God's divine nature folded into the clay. Was he not created in God's image?

Image, yes. God's nature distilled into the clay and dust, and then polished fine; so the creator could look at his own reflection, his mirror of the divine. Until Adam follows his God-given nature. Evidently free will comes with a price.

Will crosses a leg over bended knee, plucks testily at the blades of grass. The wind picks up, more rustling of unruly curls and of leaves in the branches overhead, insistent, brash and Will glances up to notice there are now more clouds than sky peeking through his canopy of green. They gather like a furrowed brow, portents of an ill-tempered tempest. Will yanks at another clump of grass.

Every creative act has its destructive consequence, Will. Out of destruction comes creation. Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.

The heavens darken as cotton clouds change from white to grey. A chilly blast bites at Will's skin, replacing the gentle sweet zephyr of a moment ago and Will closes his legs and sits up to gaze at the swaying canopy above. Rain threatens and Will dares not look in the direction of the cursed ground beyond the trees.

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return? Will says, fingers drawing circles in the dirt, then hands.

Will pushes off the ground, stands up and shouts at the sky, soiled palms turned up. *God punished Adam with mortality. A slow scornful death. His almighty punishment delivered not to instruct, but to appease the contemptuous wounded serpent inside.*

Will's words fall quiet and bitter to the ground. The air is thick with silence, molecules suddenly dense and still. He feels neither harsh gale nor tender breeze. He feels alone. He waits.

Patience is rewarded with a rippling of tender blades as Hannibal moves once again through the garden his spectral whispers fall softly, moistened breath upon Will's mouth. Rain begins to fall, descending like a sorrow laden mist onto Will's chest.

A wound inflicted by an enemy is easier to understand and far easier to forgive. There is no creature more beloved or more dear who would draw from his creator a sentence so ruinous, so severe. With all his omniscience, God could not predict the depth of his attachment to his creation.

The heavens continue to weep, the drops stream down Will's face and neck, his body soaked and his hair lies flattened against his head. He blinks up to the sky, his anger of a moment ago extinguished in the mist of soft hissing rain.

As for contemptuous wounded serpents, well… the voice whispers in his head as the wicked thing inside moves through belly and bowels.

It would appear that serpents dwell in us all. Will says, not so much in contrition as conciliation. He rubs a hand across his stomach to quiet the thing inside.

The mistake is in believing that God is inherently good, isn't it? Will says, turning into the warm wet breeze that tickles whiskers and brushes lips pursed in thought. *Or, that the devil is as black as he is painted.*

Adam left the garden in sorrow not for his sin but for the leaving. Perhaps he too had been unaware of the depth of his affection.

Will smiles with the ruffling of his hair as a warm wind whips around him, stirring up the wet leaves at his feet.

Paradise, like his innocence was lost regardless. As soon as he tasted the forbidden fruit, he knew…

He knew he should have eaten the fruit of the other tree, first.

Hannibal's voice falls softly with the rain, and Will imagines his face with lips wryly twisted to one side, the mischievous glint in the dark luminous eyes. He thinks it is lonely here in the garden with only Hannibal's voice to keep him company. And though he imagines Hannibal's face for a moment, he cannot wish him here…or he stubbornly refuses to appear.

Who first gave a name to sin, Will? Wasn't it God who came walking in the garden looking for Adam and Adam hid himself from God? The voice queries and breath blows down Will's neck causing him to shudder as he stands drenched from the waning rain.

Who told thee that thou wast naked? Will recalls from scripture as the wind, warm now, caresses his skin fresh and fragrant as dew.

Indeed. Who told thee that thou wast evil? Hannibal returns.

Satan did. But, it was Adam's sin that caused the separation.

And who created Satan? The voice hums in his ear. Muscles contracts as a cool tickle prickles along his wound, a touch of ice and silk. *What does Adam feel beneath his flesh – creation or destruction? The tree of knowledge already tasted; the tree of life beckons.*

Creator and Destroyer. If we learn our limitations too soon, we never learn our power. Will turns his head following the wind as he speaks.

The smell of smoke floats on the breeze and Will looks past the moss covered ground, and vine cloaked trees into the distance where the rust colored haze hovers over the horizon. He turns his face up to the sky. The sun has returned; glowing ever more radiantly and light filters through the leaves and the branches begin to part before his eyes, splintering and shattering above, as pieces of bark begin to plummet to the ground, pelting Will as he falls to the wet slippery earth, arms raised to shield his face from the hail of flaming bark. Through sullied fingers he sees the red rimmed eyes of his black feathered eagle staring back at him from the fallen trees.

You see the inferno in the garden. See the garden in the inferno…and revel in it.

Heat. Blazing heat on his face. His entire body is flush with warm radiating heat. Heat comes from above. Beneath is cold. And wet. Will's nostrils quiver to the scent of blood and decomposing flesh. Must be the heat… Light, too. Bright light flares with heat before his lids that flutter with the intent to open, but the light is so bright. Voices. Not Hannibal's. Not in his head? The voices are here all around him. Where is…here?

Back in the inferno, Will? On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Will squints through the dense smoke and catches glimpses of white feathers as the downy plumes brush across his brow.

Daniel?

You would let fire destroy your paradise but you will not allow a single flower to bloom in your inferno.

Everything is dead there… Will counters with a cough.

Then as you walk among the dead of your inferno delight in the flames of your desires and remember it is only to angels those flames appear as torment and insanity.

The fringe of feathers about his head withdraws and Will reaches up through the smoke and grabs only air.

Daniel?

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream…

Daniel's voice fades away into the pounding of ocean waves that thunder through Will's skull, and he feels like he is drowning in surf and smoke.

I'm going to take off your clothes. Do you know why?

You want me to reveal myself…to you.

As I have revealed myself to you. I would take nothing from you that you were not prepared to give.

"He's waking up…" Zeller's voice. Close by, hovering.

"Give him a minute. Jack, this will be like coming out of surgery." Price's voice. Also close. "Except Will doesn't remember going in the operating room…"

"He'll have short term amnesia, I know. Keep on collecting evidence and keep an eye on him. And find out what we can do about these manacles…" Jack's voice. From above.

Will lifts his head, eyes tightly shut against the brightness that hurts and turns left then right…or thinks he does. Movement is restricted elsewhere. His body tenses, aches terribly, muscles flex but…

I can't move… I am paralyzed except for my head. Like Mason… No…not like Mason. I can feel my body; I just can't move it… Where am I? Think. What is the last thing I remember?

"How long before the paramedics arrive? Do we have time to question him?" Pazzi's voice, also from above.

Trust is not a rose that blooms easily in our garden, is it?

I wanted to surprise you…

"He's not going anywhere. I don't know how we're going to get him loose." Jack's voice again, clipped and irritable, laced with fatigue.

Cigarette smoke fills the breeze, a faint prickling across his skin, and scant seconds of relief from the oppressive heat. Scores of prickles faintly felt at first quickly become an intermittent scraping along his stomach sending Will to shuddering and he shakes his head loose of red rimmed eyes and scaly eagle's talons.

Not paralyzed. Bound. I could move if I were free… I'm with the FBI… Jack and the forensic team. I was…at Hannibal's villa and…

Fragments of conversation wash over Will as he lies captive in his bonds, phrases, thoughts, and images pour over him, rush past him like he is a fish caught in a fast running stream…

Murder or mercy, Will?

Tell me, Will, when we dined in Baltimore, at my home…was I dining with your empathy or was I dining with you?

You were always dining with both.

Bedelia!

I didn't finish my dessert.

Neither did I. Remember that…

My advice to you, Mr. Graham, is to make sure you have something he wants that he cannot have if you are dead.

Achilles and Patroclus died in that battle.

In that life. Whose armor does Patroclus wear this time?

I haven't put any on.

Doomed to fall am I? And yet…you squirm here between my thighs, and hope the Fates indeed tell lies.

Nature blooms in the garden, Will. And I would share it with you… Walk in the garden…

"The Garden opens in a couple hours. What about the press?" Zeller's voice floats past him.

"Working on it." Jack's voice.

“*Firenze Polizia* are very good at this. I have it covered. But, you know there will always be one or two creative types who slip by.” Pazzi’s voice again.

“For the right price.” Jack huffs. “I’d better not see any pictures of this…of him, on the news. And keep a look-out for a red head with long curly hair. Do not talk to her.”

“I was accosted by Signorina Lounds already. She gets to know her way around pretty quickly. Very persistent that one.”

“You have no idea.” Jack knows Lounds will not wait to purchase a ticket and enter the park with the general public. She will gain entrance through other means, either cash or her version of credit. Her line of credit appears to be readily accepted by the Italian men. “Where did you see her?”

“In front of Palazzo Pitti. Very stylish for an American.”

Jack rolls his eyes, fingers his goatee and watches Pazzi pace to and fro in front of Will’s prone body. He looks at Will for a moment and then his head lifts up to gaze upon Ruggerio. Up and down his head goes as he paces. Jack is inured to the sight of nude corpses; all of law enforcement present is similarly habituated. Developing a professional detachment is necessary and always demonstrated except when it is one of your own as Ruggerio is. But staring at a live victim, nude and arranged as Will is; is vaguely voyeuristic.

Looking at Ruggerio invites sadness, sympathy, and righteous anger. Looking at Will invites an entirely different array of emotions.

Lecter has served up a masterful exhibition. The human fascination with torture and sex is universal, from Renaissance renderings of naked martyrs to glossy porn magazines. Context is what determines society’s tolerance and Hannibal has presented a challenge to the accepted norms by staging a murder scene that mimics Renaissance ideals.

Jack recognizes that Hannibal’s aesthetics are bereft of morality. He sees no difference between his tableau and a painting. To him, this is art and he is proud of his work. He finds beauty and elegance in all of his tableaux, but this time he has ensured his audience sees what he sees by employing universally recognized motifs. Ruggerio and Will are both handsome young men, and though Ruggerio is dead, he has been posed beautifully. And Will is, unfortunately for him, utterly breathtaking in his bonds.

The stagecraft of Will’s appearance is a study in Hannibal’s aesthetics. The mind recognizes the inhumane treatment, but the eyes linger and cannot ignore the beauty of the form stretched out before them. Jack wonders if it was Hannibal’s intention to disgrace or enshrine.

He thinks where Will is concerned, even Hannibal may not be able to proffer a definitive answer.

Jack watches Will struggle against the tension that pulls at his limbs as he slowly returns from his sedated retreat. As the sedatives wear off, the contorted position will become increasingly more painful as muscles stretched to their limits become fatigued. Hannibal has not made it easy to get him out of the heavy iron shackles either and Jack is amazed again at the ingenuity required to pull this off.

Hannibal must have transported everything in one vehicle, taken one of the Boboli staff vans and loaded it up, driven it to this location at Neptune’s Fountain, then driven it off dumping it somewhere near where he had parked. And apparently done it all without anyone noticing. The area is being canvassed by dozens of Policia but Jack doubts anything actionable will surface. Hannibal was here before well before dawn, under the cloak of night.

Will is a living tableau painted with meaning and messages likely in counterpoint to Ruggerio's death tableau hanging from the tree. They have photographed everything and are now engaged in collecting evidence to process it. But Will poses a challenge. They can't treat him like a corpse even though his entire body is evidence.

Jack can only collect the physical evidence in plain sight until Will wakes up and gives permission for them to look for anything else. He is the victim of a crime and as Hannibal is well aware, he is afforded certain rights and protections. Rights and protections that Pazzi is clearly itching to work around.

Pazzi wipes at the sweat on his brow and points to Will wincing with discomfort, his body bathed in sweat and gore a couple feet away.

"You could wake him at this point. He's not injured, just very uncomfortable. I want to know what happened, Agent Crawford."

"We all do. You'll get your turn. I'm not questioning him under duress nor am I asking him to profile anything until he's been cut out from those shackles and attended to by the paramedics if they ever get here."

"If Graham had been the one found dead I think you would feel differently."

Jack nods sympathetically though he feels anything but sympathy for Pazzi. As sad and untimely as Ruggerio's death is, Pazzi has only himself to blame. Will's present situation is the result of his own actions. Ruggerio is collateral damage, an unnecessary casualty in Pazzi's pursuit of his thirty pieces of silver. Jack wonders how much responsibility Will bears for Ruggerio's death. The evidence so far suggests Will is as much a victim as Ruggerio, only luckier. Although, Will might not see it that way once he is fully conscious.

"Your FBI badge does not extend to obstruction." Pazzi says, ashes of his cigarette blowing onto Jack's shoes.

"You think I'm obstructing? Go ahead and file a complaint with Interpol."

Jack shoves his hands in warm pockets as his trousers cling to him, uncomfortable and close in the humid air. Pazzi had been quiet, content to watch the FBI do their thing, while his local forensic team did theirs with Ruggerio. Allocating blame seems foremost on Pazzi's mind. Jack has his thoughts about that. The exchanges between Jack's people and his have been friendly and professional, condolences and concern offered freely. In time, the goodwill will evaporate as it always does, but for now, the shock has inspired camaraderie.

Pazzi has been eagerly awaiting Will's return to consciousness and he lights another cigarette, blows smoke over Will's prone form to hurry the waking process along.

They have all been eager and Will has not disappointed. Perhaps ten minutes, if that have passed since they found him and he already shows signs of genuine consciousness. Jack had called Clayton and arranged for paramedics while Zeller and Price had searched for the tracker. Jack had barely the time to stuff the bagged GPS device into his pocket before Pazzi had come trotting up to halt suddenly at the sight of Ruggerio strung up and mounted to the tree behind Will.

Oh, Dio mio. Santa Madre, what am I going to say to Alfonso?

Pazzi had made his way over to the tree, shaking his head awestruck at Lecter's latest tableau featuring one of his detectives. Jack had already pressed Pazzi for details on Ruggerio last night on the phone. Both of them concerned about their respective people missing in action and ultimately neither of them expressing much more than that. Jack thinks they will get some answers now.

Pazzi had actually seemed in genuine emotional distress for nearly thirty seconds before a switch had seemed to flick, coinciding Jack thinks with the moment he had knelt down to examine Will. Pazzi had stared at the bound and contorted figure, had lit a cigarette, and had continued to gaze for a couple minutes. When he had stood back up, he had once again donned his pissing contest suit.

A glimmer of blue emerges from beneath long black lashes and Will's eyes flutter open. Jack wonders what nightmares follow Will this time.

And throughout all eternity…I forgive you, you forgive me.

Hannibal…

Will…

The sun is blinding as Will's eyes open. His face is burning up. He shuts his eyes quickly tries to squint into the searing bright light and sees shapes, silhouettes framed in a brilliant glow. Hannibal left him here… They killed Ruggerio together... Had dinner. Du Maurier drugged him and Hannibal… Hannibal has left him somewhere for Jack to find. Jack is here. Misdirection… Will swallows. His throat hurts. Every inch of him seems to ache. He is so parched his tongue sticks to the roof of mouth. What kind of drugs make someone feel like this?

"Zee?" Will coughs.

"Yeah…Will. We just got here." Zee grasps his shoulder, squeezes once and then Will feels him leaning over his face and the light and heat disappears for a moment. "Take your time…"

"Water…" Will says, voice cracking, the need obvious enough.

Zee turns to Price who gets up and quickly returns with a fresh icy bottle and cracks it open, hands it off to Zee. Will chokes on the first swallow, the angle of his head and the angle of the bottle incompatible and water runs down his chin, neck and onto the ground.

"Shit…"

"Ice?" Will suggests through slits while licking lips with the water he managed to keep in his mouth.

Price is off to the cooler again and returns with a Styrofoam cup of cracked ice. He holds it out to Zeller who realizes Will is not going to hold the ice himself and shakes his head at Price. Price rolls his eyes, and commences to present a chuck of ice to Will.

Will opens his mouth like a bird, too thirsty to be concerned with appearances and sucks the ice into his mouth feeling relief instantly. The water spilling in a wasteful torrent had been frustrating, and extracting the moisture slowly from the frigid little cube is maddeningly slow, but soon he is crunching on it and opening his mouth for another chunk.

Price patiently slips five more chunks of ice into Will's waiting mouth before putting down the cup.

"Let that settle." Price says, "I know you want more, and you are very dehydrated, but we don't want you getting nauseous either."

"You're um…still a little out of it, but you're safe. You can't move because your arms and legs are bound up, but you're not hurt. Understand?" Zee says, clearly not wanting to say too much.

Will nods his head, more a roll than anything else, but the sensation of solid ground beneath and the sound of his skull scraping the dirt is a comfort, he no longer flies on the wing of madness. He makes his mouth curve up into something he hopes resembles a smile.

The water refreshes his body and his mind. Sensations prick his awareness as he becomes more acclimated to his surroundings, thoughts meandering in a maze of indistinct snapshots that he concentrates imposing order upon.

"Where's…Jack?"

"I'm right here, Will. Sit tight." Jack says gently, stooping to brush damp hair off the furrowed brow. "You understand what's happening?"

"Hannibal…dumped me someplace. I'm conscious enough to know I'm bound and naked in front of a lot of people." Will says, searching for a calm place to park his mind beneath the layers of indignity that threaten to overwhelm him. *Fuck Mason. I'm going to kill Hannibal myself…*

The pale blue eyes roll between slits as Will looks aside, avoiding eye contact and Jack winces in sympathy. The contorted position has to be uncomfortable and judging by the ragged breathing and twitching along the jawline, as frustrating as it is humiliating.

"Welcome back, Will." Price says, "Had us going there. Not…a pleasant way to start my day."

"I apologize… for the… inconvenience." Will mumbles.

"Apology accepted." Price grins, lifting his eyes to Jack's. "You might have been better off unconscious."

"Try not to be alarmed when you have a look at yourself. It looks worse than it is." Zee says.

Will takes in a gulp of air, tenses against his bonds, "I doubt it."

"Bet it's not the first time he's uh…been tied up." Pazzi says under his breath with a sidelong glance at Jack.

Thankfully, Will didn't hear the remark or he ignored it, but Jack throws Pazzi a warning look. Pazzi's shoulder tics up in a dismissive shrug. He fixes his gaze beyond Will to look at his team collecting evidence from around Ruggerio's corpse.

"Will. We're working on getting you out of there, but we're still collecting evidence from your body."

Jack's voice hums before his face, Will can smell the after shave and sweat. They are outside and it is sweltering hot. What does Jack mean collecting evidence? From his body…as in a crime scene?

Will… Tsk. Tsk. If I tell you it will spoil the surprise.

“Are you processing…me?” Will says.

“Afraid so.” Jack says. “Will, you are the crime scene. You are part of the tableau.”

Leave Ruggerio to me…

Thoughts and images cleave to the corners of his mind, cobwebs clinging upon shifting shadows. His body is flooded with sensation from within and without. He feels more like himself, but to say he can acutely feel himself would be more accurate. The sun is so bright he can’t open his eyes except to squint. He’s not sure he wants to open them.

“Just let Jimmy and Zee do their thing and then we’ll work on getting you out.” Jack is saying.

“C’mon Jack…I’m um…feeling a breeze in places I shouldn’t.”

Zee looks up at Jack, as does Price wearing a scornful expression, he scolds Jack with a wag of his finger before turning back around to his kit. Price had been relieved of his duties with Ruggerio. Once Pazzi and crew arrived, they had insisted the FBI stand aside. Jack had acquiesced, anticipating the request. He would have done the same. Oddly, Detective D’Angelo, Ruggerio’s partner is not present. Jack did not ask but figures she may have been too emotional. Perhaps, Pazzi has not even informed her of her partner’s demise and he sent her elsewhere today.

“Uh huh. We’ll cover you up as soon as the evidence is collected. We found you in your birthday suit. You can thank Hannibal. He’s got you in quite a pose.”

Will looks at him through slated eyes, his expression grimly resolute. He is clearly awake and aware and Jack knows how difficult this must be for him. Waking up to this would upset anyone, but Will receives no respite from his empathy. Jack figures he is probably picturing the scene in his head right now and Jack wonders if Will is imagining Ruggerio in the scene with him of if he is only aware of himself.

Pazzi has not shared his thoughts with Jack and Jack knows why. If Pazzi had sent Ruggerio undercover without the authority to do so, he faces an inquiry if not the Italian equivalent of an internal investigation. If he can blame Ruggerio’s death on Will, he increases his chances of coming out of any investigation smelling like the proverbial rose. None of this matters if Pazzi takes Mason Verger up on his reward and if his attitude toward Will is any indication that is exactly what he plans on doing.

Jack is not sure what he thinks. He vacillates between one scenario and another. Hannibal clearly got to both Ruggerio and Will, but whether or not he apprehended them together is something Will will have to clarify if he can. Jack is well aware Hannibal is a formidable adversary and inhumanly strong, but resisting both Ruggerio and Will armed with weapons would be quite a feat. Unless Will had not drawn his weapon on Hannibal and Jack knows that is entirely possible. Jack is most comfortable with the scenario that has Hannibal accosting them separately. Will is unstable, but Jack cannot believe he would kill a police officer.

Unless Ruggerio had found him someplace he shouldn’t have been…

“The paramedics will be here soon to check you out.” Jack says.

“Can’t wait…”

Jack’s lips tic to the side, offering a lop-sided apology until he realizes Will can’t see him because sunlight streams directly into his face, and he moves to cast his shadow over the shackled form at his feet. He glances at Pazzi standing beside him, who catches the drift and also positions himself between Will and the blistering Tuscan sun.

Jack squats down to better converse with Will next time he speaks. He knows Will is aware of his surroundings now. He is aware of the ogling, the compulsion to gawk at the macabre unavoidable. Even the seasoned agents can’t help themselves. The voyeur in each and every person here will remain for the duration. It’s nothing personal. Will’s pose is compelling, and his appearance is just as compelling. Hannibal’s appreciation for Will’s physical assets is on full display.

The pictures of Will sedated and freshly stitched up in the ER that Freddie Lounds had posted in Tattle Crime had at least been censored. Here, now, as the main attraction in a murder tableau, no less for the fact that he is alive, his masculine charms rest in plain view, no embellishment required. When Zeller and Price have finished collecting the sordid evidence they will drop something over the essentials while they figure out how to best extract him from the knots of chains securing him to the spikes.

Pazzi’s relentless innuendo aside, his romanticizing of the first tableaux and his overt sexualizing of this one has merit and bears closer scrutiny. Will’s pose certainly invites closer scrutiny. Pazzi has been unable to shift his gaze elsewhere for very long and Will’s casual assessment of Pazzi’s Napoleon syndrome while amusing also has merit. Jack slips a sidelong glance at Pazzi and concedes Will probably wins bragging rights on that score. He stifles a yawn he figures could be from lack of sleep or from the tedium of standing in one place for too long and yearns for the days when homicides and detectives seemed simpler.

Hannibal has also placed Will in the position of imagining this tableau from an awkward perspective. He will compulsively assume Hannibal’s point of view while imagining himself as the victim. The mind games continue…

The shift in motive behind the selection of Hannibal’s victims is decidedly personal in nature. He is no longer grocery shopping as Will had once referred to it. The Chesapeake Ripper killed to demean and punish, taking pleasure in consuming the flesh of offenders at his table. With the Paolini and the appearance of Will, and Ruggerio, Hannibal’s pathology may have shifted as well, or evolved as Will had characterized it. Jack concedes Hannibal is in survival mode. However, Hannibal’s *interest* in Will is undiminished; his *attachment* to Will is undeniable. Hannibal remains consistently abusive and intrusive in his treatment of Will, and powerfully possessive.

And Will.

Will continues to place himself in harm’s way and remains undeterred in his pursuit of his tormentor.

Each of them has tried to kill the other and yet neither has managed to succeed which makes Jack wonder if Chilton’s disingenuous assertion is actually correct. Perhaps Jack is witnessing the courtship of two psychopaths. Whether flirting or foreplay or something else, the magnetism between them invites an intriguing psychological paradox, a can of worms Jack is loath to open all the way; a loose string from a tangled ball of yarn he dares not pull lest it unravel in his lap.

You have appearances to maintain. And…I promise you will make quite the appearance.

Snips of his conversations with Hannibal continue to pop along the synapses of his brain. The distinct smell of blood and bodily fluids hangs in the air wafting over Will with the fetid breeze. The breeze does bring relief from the relentless heat if only briefly. There is no respite from the sweat that pools in every crevice, a sticky second skin he could scrape off with his finger. A stronger gust strikes his nose and Will detects the smell of pond scum, moss and algae. He also detects something else. The smell of dried blood is coming from him; his skin pulls tight, like it is caked with it.

The scratching at his stomach is interminable, his nightmares spilling out of dreams all over him. He opens his eyes despite the glaring sun and blinks the blurriness away. His lower half is completely bare, legs shockingly posed and bound…in metal shackles and heavy links of chain. His body is smeared crimson, flecked with chunks of viscera and long black feathers from sternum clear past his pelvic bones.

He closes his eyes as the vision of talons tearing at his flesh as though scaling a fish, mercilessly ripping out glossy feathers descends sending tremors throughout.

Let it out, Will.

Not like this…

Let it all the way out. Reveal yourself. It's the only way you can leave your inferno. Stripped of indifference.

"Will? Are you okay?" Zee's voice. "The scar…it's not still tender, is it?"

"Just…nightmares. I'm…all right." Will takes a breath, opens his eyes to find Zee and Price paused in their work, bloody gloved hands suspended in the air. "Really, I'm okay."

He swallows the panic, allows it to settle far down in his gut. Hannibal could not know what he had been hallucinating. The blood and feathers refer to something else. Hannibal has posed him in a most compromising position, his private carnage exposed. Will figures Ruggerio can't be too far away. The organs can't possibly belong to anyone else.

Leave Ruggerio to me…

He glances first to his left since his head is already positioned that way. Will gazes from between slits, notices a dark gelatinous mound at his side. Will rifles through his knowledge cabinet of anatomy in an effort to identify the organ. Clearly, everyone has been directed to refrain from divulging too much about the scene to him. Jack is introducing him to the scene slowly; scrutinizing everything he does and says.

Apparently, he has yet to sell Jack the victim platter Hannibal has served him up on.

"Is that…a liver?" Will asks, licking at very dry lips. His tongue sticks like plaster his mouth. No saliva.

"Uh, yeah. At least a chunk of one. It's not yours, though." Zee says, intending to be reassuring but realizing immediately how insipid a remark that was, looks up for a moment as he berates himself.

"We've got the area cordoned off. It's…as private as we can make it, Will." Price says all apologies.

Will grits his teeth. “Guess I’ll um…have a look around.”

Zee backs off from Will’s line of sight so he can follow the blood trail from left of his body to his right. Will’s breath catches as his gaze alights on the body of Ruggerio sagging in front of the tree as his mind absorbs the scene.

Leave Ruggerio to me. Agamemnon will not be able to sweep his culpability under the rug.

Hannibal has kept his word. From his vantage point he quickly notes the wounds, the arrows, the placement of limbs and head, and the bloody trail of organ sections that rolls down a slight incline from the exposed roots of the tree to him. Hannibal has created a monument to martyrdom; *Santo Angelo di Firenze.*

Images of Ruggerio standing warm and alive in Hannibal’s garden by stalks of sunflowers give way to the stark lighting of his naked corpse laid out on Hannibal’s metal work table, pale and wet under a stream of water as Hannibal hoses him down.

Tsk. Tsk. He is a Greek. What are Achilles and Patroclus to do with him?

Patroclus has appearances to keep.

Hannibal has provided him with an alibi nearly impossible to refute except that the looking doesn’t feel like an alibi. Will turns away as though a simple twist of his head could halt the images of himself, not Hannibal, taking a scalpel to Ruggerio’s spine, of peeling back flaps of skin to expose vertebrae wrapped in bright pink flesh, of scooping out his organs, of hammering metal stakes into unyielding bark, of binding his cold blue veined wrists with coarse rope, and of driving arrows in between ribs and through muscle and tissue...

Ruggerio opens his eyes and looks at Will as he hangs against the tree, his countenance woeful as the large brown eyes sweep over his body posed beneath him following the trail of his blood and organs back to Will. Will swallows and meets the sorrowful brown eyes. He knows he has to do this.

Mercy won’t work… I’m sorry Pazzi sent you, Ruggerio. I truly am.

It was merciful of him to snap my neck but not so merciful my last conscious moment found me staring into your eyes as I do now. You betrayed me.

I betrayed your ideal of me.

I should have known you would kill me?

I did not kill you. I allowed the killing to happen. Pazzi knew what might happen when he sent you. That’s why he sent you.

You weren’t expecting me.

It wasn’t supposed to be you.

I wasn’t ready to leave…

I know.

He's imposed upon me his image of what I am.

He does that, frequently. You died in the line of duty; he has made a saint of you.

I am the blood and breath that fueled your becoming. Out of destruction comes creation. Do you accept my sacrifice? Do you accept what you have become?

Yes… I know who I am.

Jack sees the helpless slackening of Will's body as he observes Ruggerio's corpse. The blue eyes glisten in sympathy and Jack imagines those blue eyes are desperately trying to avoid the gaze of the Polizia crew stealing glances at him. Jack is eager to hear Will's take on Hannibal's handling of Ruggerio and him. This tableau presents a radical departure from the previous butchery.

Will turns, looks up first to Jack, and focuses on the moment, steps into it, under it, like an umbrella shielding him from the sensory assault that continues to pour. His are eyes better acclimated to the bright light now and he holds Jack in his gaze a few seconds before turning to Pazzi standing beside him, the predator within pacing the entire time.

Is the sacrifice downstairs an act of God?

Ask the sacrifice…

"You…sent him after me. Probably right after I got in the cab."

The words are spoken softly as Will usually speaks, but the tone is edged with quiet anger. Pazzi stares back into the steely blue eyes unmoved by the accusatory gleam he finds there.

"And he found you. Did you see him?" Pazzi exhales more smoke.

Will thinks he will kill Pazzi long before the cigarettes do. He licks his lips with a tongue he forgets is coated with paste shaking his head slightly in answer, barely an acknowledgement but a lie nonetheless.

"But, somebody did. Saw us both."

"Where did your boyfriend grab you?" Pazzi says almost grinning he is so pleased with himself for the double entendre.

"Captain Pazzi…" Jack glares at Pazzi, his large brown eyes locking with Pazzi's hooded nearly black ones defying him to say anything further.

Pazzi would not tolerate this treatment of his own and Jack is galled by the barrage of animosity directed at Will. He's also tired of the incendiary comments from Pazzi, but Jack lets it go with the look. Will can handle himself. Besides, Jack wants to know, too.

"Went back to Impruneta. The square…Piazza Garibaldi. Near Santa Maria." Will lifts his left shoulder, not easily off the ground a little. "There should be a wound here, where the syringe went in, from behind."

Will is careful not to clarify anything, delivering to Jack half-truths wrapped in ambiguity. Nothing Will says right now is admissible, and no has accused him of anything…yet. Hannibal has bound him up like this to help…in his own way. Will thinks Jack will carefully phrase his own questions so that Pazzi cannot infer too much. It is clear that Pazzi has not been forthcoming to Jack, either.

Jack gives Price the nod to check out Will's shoulder. Sure enough, torn flesh and a puncture wound are visible along with a little bruising indicating the wound was inflicted several hours ago. Price nods at Jack, pats Will's shoulder before resuming his evidence collecting from Will's torso.

"So you didn't see him?" Jack says.

"Never saw the needle go in, but it was daytime. Jack…he's got my clothes, my phone, and my gun."

"I know. He called me on your phone. That's how I knew where to find you." Jack says thinking that is mostly true.

He sticks his hand in his pocket and fingers the bagged GPS tracker. He can discuss the implications of the tracker he gave Du Maurier with Will later, away from Pazzi. There is also the matter of the FBI flash drive Zeller presented to Will before his trip to the Uffizi. One thing at a time.

Pazzi shrugs him off and turns back to the bound and naked killer at his feet. As helpless as he is at the moment, Graham exudes violence like the sweat that shines on his skin. He is certain Will Graham is every bit as dangerous as the cannibal they are looking for. He is almost as certain that Will Graham knows exactly what happened to his detective. Either way, Graham's days are numbered. Pazzi can almost count the days for his own departure, not from existence, but from Italy. He will at last be the husband to Allegra he has always wished to be, the one his current profession and paltry salary does not allow.

Will smacks dry lips, refocuses his gaze, tries to ignore the constant press of fingers and cold tingly scrape of metal on his skin. "Ruggerio didn't call in?"

"No." Comes the reply, curt and dismissive. The tone is distinctly challenging, the unspoken *so what* hangs in the air.

The predator stretches inside, restless to come out and Will takes a breath and another. But for his restraints he thinks he would absolutely have a tough time controlling his impulses. Will thinks he must still be somewhat drugged. He's not appalled at himself in the slightest.

Pazzi shifts his weight from one foot to the other as he ashes his cigarette precariously close to Will's head. Jack lifts a brow, eager to see where Will's questioning of Pazzi goes. Pazzi was vague about this very thing on the phone, and again earlier this morning.

"And you weren't concerned considering who you sent him after?" Will says.

"He had his instructions."

Will looks to Jack and Jack nods slowly. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The trouble is everyone is everyone else's enemy, and no one is aware of the conundrum. Will thinks dealing with Hannibal is far easier than mixing it up with the Greeks. Well, dealing with Hannibal is more honest. At least he knows what he's getting.

Pazzi glances up at the older man walking towards them who Will guesses is his medical examiner. Pazzi takes the clipboard from wrinkled hands, the aged and painfully swollen knuckles suggest arthritis. He looks into the grim and grey whiskered face. Apprehension is folded into every crease of his brow as he nods to Jack and offers a vague greeting to the circle of Price, Zee, and Will.

“Cause of death?” Pazzi says without looking up as though asking for the time of day.

“Besides gross negligence?” Will says before the M.E. can answer.

Jack opens his mouth to interject, then stops. Will has a point. The M.E. looks from Will to Pazzi and his furrowed brow becomes more pronounced.

Pazzi looks down at Will, eyes narrow and his top lip curls. “Who the fuck do you think you are, talking to me like that?”

“It should have been you.” Will says flatly. *It was supposed to be…you.*

Jack observes the challenge in the pale blue eyes that gaze up from the ground. Despite his vulnerable position, the menace behind Will’s words is unmistakable. The air is already dripping with tension, bodies dripping with perspiration, and tempers are about to ignite. Will is understandably upset and Pazzi is belligerent for no reason other than to be so.

Jack moves to stand between Pazzi and Will, edging Pazzi aside, not easily.

“What was the cause of death?” Jack asks, reaching to take the clipboard off Pazzi’s hands.

“Broken neck. There’s a rod of rebar… along his spine eh? And it’s bent at a precise angle so his head hangs like that.” The M.E. says, crooking his finger for the added visual.

“Anything else outstanding?” Jack asks as Pazzi pulls the clipboard out of Jack’s reach.

“I’ll uh, read this over and get back to you, eh? Agent Crawford… Signor Graham…” Pazzi tosses Will a cursory glance before following his M.E. back to the tree.

A plucking of skin and the sharp pinch at his pubic line causes Will to flinch. He peers between slits to find Zeller hovering over his privates and he groans causing Zee to pause and sit up straight.

“Sorry, Will. Used to taking this stuff off of corpses. I’ll be more careful.“

“We’re almost done.” Price offers on a cheery note.

“If I was a corpse, would you be taking this long?”

“Uh, no. We’d be grabbing up the organ pieces with our fingers.” Zee says.

“Then do that. Didn’t know you were such a prima donna, Zee.”

“Yeah, but pieces have slid down…” Zee protests. “And you’re awake now.”

Jack grins and nods as Zee looks up from Will’s blood splattered torso. “You heard the man. Get it done, Zee.”

It occurs to Will that Daniel is not present. Neither is D'Angelo. Will is grateful Alia is not at the crime scene. The entire situation is nearly unbearable as it is without dealing with the emotional pain she would cause without even realizing it.

"Jack…did you call Dan…Doctor Clayton?"

Jack nods reassuringly. "He'll meet you at the hospital. I saw no reason to bring him here."

"Agreed. As long as he knows what's going on."

Will swallows and focuses on the scraping of sand in his throat rather than the scraping of latex covered fingers along his inner thighs and more intimate places. He tugs at his bonds, but muscles and tissue have been too long in the position, the chain pulled too taut to make much difference. Though his limbs are fraught with fatigue, he feels the heaviness gripping wrists and ankles. He also feels something in the small of his back, positioned at his coccyx.

"Hey, did you guys wedge something underneath me?"

"No. You feel something? Is it sharp?" Zee says.

"No. It's not a rock…flatter, but hard." Will says edging from side to side as Zeller and Price move back to give him room to maneuver. "Definitely something there."

"Maybe we should uh, have a look?" Price says.

"Why not." Will grumbles.

Lifting up from the ground is not easily accomplished. The effort is exhausting as Will raises bottom and lower back from the blood soaked ground. There is finally enough room for Zee to reach underneath and pull out the offending article. With a winded gasp Will falls back to the ground and looks to Zee.

Zee holds up a black and brown leather bound book by its edges, a slim volume, clearly not new.

"Check this out." Zee says. "More evidence."

"What is it?" Price says, discarding his gloves in favor of a fresh pair.

"Baudelaire. *Fleurs du Mal*." Zee reads, taking up a cloth and wiping the soiled cover carefully.

"Baudelaire? A reference to the other tableaux? Luciano's." Jack says, rolling his eyes. "Please no more classical lit references."

"Baudelaire isn't classical, Jack, it's…" Zee stops with one tired look from Jack.

"Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* provided inspiration for Rodin's *Gates of Hell*." Price says, grabbing the book from Zee's hands.

Price begins thumbing through it, gloved fingers carefully turning the thin pages of the antique copy. "It's in French."

"Of course it is." Jack says.

“It’s got a copyright of 1898! Wow. Just look at this…” Price says.

Will stares at the book Price holds gleefully in his hands like buried treasure, gripping it gently between his fingers. He glances at the arrow riddled slouched body of Ruggerio and back to his own, shackled with chains, one leg draped over a rock. Feathers and organs smeared over his stomach…

“Jimmy… Finish processing. We’ll look at it later. I’m sure it was put there for a reason, but let’s get Will free.”

“Right.” Price bags the book and sets it aside. “We’re pretty much done. Zee…don’t worry about the blood, the paramedics will clean him up.”

Price pulls a towel from his duffle bag and arranges it between Will’s legs. “That’s the best I can do. Glad I brought the large towels…” He winks at Will and then tucks the smile back before Will has time to respond.

Will rolls his eyes to Jack and clears his throat. “What were you saying about having a tough time getting me out?”

“Price! Explain to Will what you told me.”

“Tell him about the chains.”

“Sure Jack. The chain and manacles are made of black iron. Late Medieval or Renaissance period. Authentic. Dungeon quality. Dense and heavy. I mean…the real thing.”

“Lecter probably swiped them from a museum.” Zee says.

“Like the Uffizi, maybe?” Jack raises a brow.

By Jack’s tone Will knows Jack has been thinking about what Will found at the Uffizi, more specifically, what he did not tell Jack he found there when he had the chance. Will thinks he finds himself in the untenable position of committing the sins of omission far too frequently.

“Borrowed.” Will says, ignoring Jack, committing the sin yet again. “Hannibal doesn’t steal…he borrows.”

Zee chuckles, “Either way, this black iron was designed to be escape proof.”

“For that century. What’s the problem getting me out of them?”

“Lecter has them looped and tied in knots from spikes to you.”

“And the manacles? Don’t tell me he didn’t leave a key.”

“No key that we could find. Getting them off is going to be a hassle. We’ll need laser saws and we can’t cut them at your wrists because we can’t insulate you from the heat. The knots are thick and run the entire length of each chain.” Price says.

“The black iron is too dense to be affected by a manual saw or even the blade of a power saw.” Zee frowns.

“It would ruin the saw before you made a dent. And…four appendages, four separate chains. Doing one at a time will take even longer.” Will sighs.

“Exactly.”

Even if they cut through the chains, the manacles still have to come off somehow. Will decides this is far too complicated for Hannibal. It’s not that he wouldn’t appreciate making it difficult for Will; but it is not his pathology to create such a physical challenge. His designs are cerebral; intended to show off his intellect and superiority. His designs appeal to emotions; they are miniature theatre, his field kabuki.

When you wake up, this will all make sense to you.

Will’s mind churns with possibilities. Hannibal would not have left him like this without a key. They simply have not recovered everything yet. Hannibal has deliberately arranged it so Will’s extraction from his bonds takes time. Time to do what?

Locate the key. Locating the key will require intellect and reasoning, right up Hannibal’s alley. Always testing him. It wasn’t enough to stick him in a tableau; Will has to get himself out of it, too. What he needs is context. He apparently has plenty of time. Hannibal has bought Will time to examine the tableau and find the embedded messages.

“Where are we?” Will asks looking up at the sea of faces around him.

“Sorry, Will. Should have mentioned it sooner. Boboli Gardens. About a ten minute walk from the entrance at the Pitti Palace and smack in front of Neptune’s Statue.” Jack tosses a cool glance at Zeller.

Zee shrugs, hands out in a helpless gesture. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Say anything about what?”

“About how the locals call this *Forcone Fontana*.”

“Zee…” Jack warns holding up a finger.

“What’s that…fork fountain?” Will says, grateful for Daniel’s insistence on conversing in Italian during dinner.

“Pitchfork. Referring to Neptune’s trident. Florentines take the credit for inventing the modern fork. So they refer to the trident as a fork in homage to that.”

“Thanks for the abbreviated version.” Jack says.

“Catherine de’Medici introduced forks as a utensil for the very first time in the early Sixteenth century. The credit…is well deserved.”

Pazzi speaks from under the tree where his team continues to collect and process Ruggerio. He directs his own investigation while keeping an ear to the FBI and everything Will says to them.

“You think this tableau is connected to the fountain or to the Medici?” Pazzi surprisingly looks to Will.

"I don't know, yet. I'm going to have to have a look at all the evidence."

Will is aware of the history between the Medici and Pazzi's ancestors, but he can see no connection at the moment. Curious that Pazzi's mind went there.

"You do get the pun, right?" Will stares into blank faces and he thinks they all collectively forgot Hannibal is a cannibal.

"Pun?" Pazzi asks while Jack rolls his eyes from Will to the wet gleaming figure grasping his trident across the walkway.

"Florentine recipes?" Jack asks as he stares at the sun dappled pond.

"That…would be my guess. He made a tableau in front of the biggest fork in Florence."

Pazzi stalks over from the roots of the tree to stand again beside Jack. "He's going to eat… Ruggerio?"

"When you finish with inventory," Will says, "whatever is missing will have already been tenderized, marinated, and cooked. Likely with…spinach."

"We already found spinach leaves beneath the tree. *Porca Madosca*!" Pazzi winces and crosses himself, "He thinks this is funny?"

"It amuses him." Will says squinting up from the blood soaked ground. "All of this…amuses him."

"What else are you thinking, Will?"

Will's capacity for rational thought under the most stressful of conditions continues to impress Jack. Though waking only moments ago to find himself staked to the blood covered ground of the murdered Ruggerio, and now with only a towel draped between his legs to cover him, he still manages to think.

"He would have left a key…" Will insists. "He knows getting these chains off would take time. There's an alternative and I would rather find it now than later, after we missed the opportunity to make it easy."

Will closes his eyes allowing the immediate scene to slip away as he shuffles the visual evidence around in his mind to connect with the vines of images already blooming blossoms.

While Will retreats into his head, Jack turns to Price. "What's the ETA on the paramedics?"

"Any minute."

"And how long for the saw to get here?"

"Oh…they're on the way. Firenze Fire Department responded first…"

Will drifts, the cold wet ground fades from his consciousness as he walks through the fragments of his hallucinations and memories of the past several hours.

See the inferno in the garden. See the garden in the inferno…

He is in the garden now. Where is the inferno? *Les Fleurs du Mal…* Hannibal placed the inferno at the seat of his garden, or pants as it were.

“Jimmy?”

“Yeah, Will?”

“Were any pages highlighted, or marked up in that book?”

“God, I hope not. That’s an antique…I can’t imagine what it’s worth.”

“I can’t imagine what this chunk of medieval chain is worth either but I’m about to cut through it, so rip through that antique, Jimmy.” Jack says.

Price flips through the pages as carefully and slowly as he can without ripping them, but then hastens as he catches the disapproving grimace on Jack’s face.

“Oh, here…he underlined these passages with a pencil. Anyone speak French? I haven’t since high school.”

“I doubt you spoke it then either.” Price says, “I don’t. I took Latin.”

“And that comes in so handy, doesn’t it?” Price’s face scrunches up. “I still take out Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* every once in a while…”

“Guys! I just speak Italian.” Jack says, “How about you, Captain?”

Pazzi shakes his head. “No…no French.” He smirks.

Will sighs. “I speak French. He knows I speak French.”

“What a surprise. French.” Pazzi says.

“I didn’t know you spoke French, Will.” Price chimes in, “Ah…*la langue de l’amour.* Well, I’m impressed.”

“I grew up in Louisiana. Everybody speaks French.” Will says. “Hold it up so I can read it.”

“Out loud? Please read it out loud.” Price says, rubbing his hands together.

“Will can regale us with French poetry another time.” Jack says.

Will quickly peruses the page Price holds over his face.

Prière

Gloire et louange à toi, Satan, dans les hauteurs Du Ciel, où tu régnas, et dans les profondeurs De l'Enfer, où, vaincu, tu rêves en silence! Fais que mon âme un jour, sous l'Arbre de Science, Près de toi se repose, à l'heure où sur ton front Comme un Temple nouveau ses rameaux s'épandront!

Charles Baudelaire

“It’s from the poem titled *The Litanies of Satan*, Jack. He has underlined the last stanza. It’s a *prière,* a prayer. It’s kind of like a *Now I lay me down to sleep* kind of prayer. Except the prayer asks to rest beside the tree of science, or knowledge…"

"Oh, right…because science rhymes with silence in French, too!" Price says and Zee shakes his head at him.

Will grins despite himself. "It is a little more challenging to find something to rhyme with knowledge, isn't it?"

"What's knowledge in French?" Zee asks.

"*Connaissance*." Will says.

"That rhymes…"

"But it has too many syllables." Price frowns at Zee. "Is he ridiculing the enlightenment or hailing it as an alternative to religion here?" Price pokes Zee in the shoulder. "Huh? What do you think?"

"Well, the entire collection is tongue in cheek, isn't it?" Zee says, trying to pull the book from Price's fingers.

"Will…" Jack prompts before Zee and Price send Will off road with their irrelevant chatter. Pazzi stands silently observing, fingers stroking his beard.

Will looks over at the tree, narrating his thoughts for his audience. "So it's a prayer. Grant that my soul someday rest…under the Tree of Knowledge…its branches like a Temple overhead…And…because it's a prayer I should bow my head, but this isn't a prayer to God, it's a prayer to Satan, so I would raise my head instead…Jack, the key is in the tree. Above Ruggerio.

Pazzi follows Zee and Price over to Ruggerio's body, still hanging in place from the blood smeared tree. It takes a moment for someone to bring a step ladder, but sure enough, a corroded and slightly rusted key has been nailed into the bark.

"Oh my God." Price says, "Will…you're a genius."

"No…but I do know an evil genius very well."

"Somebody call Firenze Fire Department and tell them thanks, but they are off the hook." Jack bellows as at least three people pick up their phones.

Within minutes Will is sitting up rubbing at sore wrists amidst applause from the surrounding FBI agents and the Polizia. Will bites at his lower lip and nods in acknowledgement, eyes down the entire time. The pang of guilt is sharp and quick in his chest while the creature inside coils causing a curious sensation that sends his toes to curling in the dirt.

Pazzi does not applaud, but offers a Will a quick smile, so quick as to be meaningless and just long enough to be taunting. Jack squats down, steadies himself with one knee to look into Will's face.

"I'd like to clarify what drugs he used on you. If you don't mind, I want a drug work up of what's left in your system."

"Okay." Will says. "I'd like to know myself."

"Hallucinations?"

“In technicolor.”

“While you’re at it, you should have them run a rape kit.” Pazzi says.

Jack does a one eighty so quickly he nearly topples onto Will. Will’s mouth drops open. He closes it as he feels Jack’s hand alight on his shoulder. Will knows by the look on Pazzi’s face he has been waiting to throw this singular indignity at him all morning. Hannibal may have to flip a coin with him for this one.

“Captain Pazzi. We discussed this already…” Jack says, wanting to slug Pazzi. He knows Will does.

“You discussed running a rape kit on me? For what reason?” Will looks to Jack, not trusting himself to look at Pazzi.

“He doesn’t know what drugs were used on him. How could he know what was done to him while he was drugged?” Pazzi says before Jack can respond.

“And I said we already know who did this. There is no reason to run one. Will’s consent is necessary and I don’t hear him asking.”

“Considering Lecter’s infatuation with him, I would think Signor Graham would want to be thorough. Lecter’s drawings would appear to suggest amorous attentions and the pose…well.”

Will tosses his head up at the sky in frustration, and he feels his hands contract into fists. Hannibal has his reasons for sticking Will in his tableau and Will understands them. He doesn’t like them much, but he understands. Pazzi is being punitive, adding insult to injury for his own amusement. Pazzi knows Hannibal has never committed any sexual crimes. And Jack had no business discussing those drawings with Pazzi. None. He glares at Jack. Price and Zeller look aside, cringing in the tense calm before the imminent explosion.

“Will…Captain Pazzi has been very thorough in his inquiries about you. I clarified some things for him, including the rumors circulating about Hannibal’s drawings. Better he understand the facts than read Tattle Crime.”

At the mention of Tattle Crime, Will’s face falls. “How does that stuff even get out there, Jack? I mean does the FBI’s own Forensic Team, present company excluded of course, take covert pictures and auction them off?”

Jack glares back at Will. “Well, Chilton runs his mouth. Wrote a book.”

“Just stop right there. Chilton…”

Will sighs an exasperated sigh. He thinks there is not at island remote enough to escape from all this.

“I think I would know if he had expressed the amorous intentions you are suggesting.” Will says, indignation at Pazzi’s audacity sticking in his throat. He feels the warm flush of embarrassment running up his neck. “Jack…If I was passed out, he wouldn’t have touched me…like that. He would consider that…rude.”

“It would have to be mutually consensual.”

“Yes.”

“We have no physical evidence linking Lecter to the scene. With DNA we could…”

“That may not be true. We may find prints on the arrows, the manacles, the chains… He knows we know who it is. There is no reason to disguise his identity. Only his residence.” Jack says, thinking of the GPS and wondering if he could have gotten away with placing one on Du Maurier. Another missed opportunity.

“If I may…” Price says timidly, leaving Zee to watch wide eyed, mouth twitching with trepidation. “I don’t think a rape kit is necessary and it would be a waste of time…and effort.”

“Oh? Please explain, Signor Price is it?”

“Special Agent Price actually.” Price huffs. “Same sex relationships among the Greeks took many forms. Oral, intercrural, and others, but anal not so much. Not between equals of the same social class, like warriors for instance. Now, pederasty – that was totally a top and bottom dynamic. Lover and beloved. I don’t think Will’s relationship with Lecter qualifies as pederasty.”

“Thanks.” Will says flatly thinking Pazzi’s remark had plucked a nerve tender enough to send the usually mild Price to step out of his comfort zone.

“What was that middle thing…inter...?” Pazzi starts.

“Oh, look it up yourself.” Zee says. “The other reason a rape kit is unnecessary is because Will is clean. I mean totally clean. Except for the dirt and blood from the scene, there is no other evidence clinging to his body. Anywhere. Even his hair is clean. His nails.”

Will knows Pazzi stares at him without having to look up. A necessary precaution to wash all evidence of Will’s visit down the drain; a selfish pleasure to bathe his Patroclus, and Will can imagine what thoughts had consumed Hannibal while taking fragrant soap and soft cloth to his skin as he had lain unconscious in a tub full of water. He knows Hannibal had not hosed him down. Their circle of intimacy and violence remains unbroken.

“It’s the same with Ruggerio, isn’t it?” Jack says. “Lecter cleaned them up to remove evidence, not just to look pretty in the tableau.”

“Ruggerio is clean, but rinsing off a dead body is very different from washing a live one. You just said he wouldn’t touch you. He bathed you?”

You think God did not touch Adam?

Will ducks his head, remembering fragments of being dunked in water and sex, *intercrural* sex, by the sea. “Evidently...there was a little touching. Zee? Are your sure the dirt is only from the crime scene?”

“Pretty sure. Easy enough to confirm. If the evidence from your body matches exactly to the scene then, yeah. You and Ruggerio were effectively sanitized. There would be nothing to run a rape kit on.”

“He doesn’t want to be found, Jack, and he went to great lengths to assure we don’t find him. Drugged me so I couldn’t remember, took my clothes, washed me down just like Ruggerio.”

“Why were you in downtown Impruneta looking for him?” Pazzi asks.

“Shopping. Hannibal has certain tastes, certain ingredients he prefers in his cuisine. Not just people. Rare and expensive ingredients.” Will lies and it is so incredibly easy to lie; the words, they flow right out of his mouth with such quiet certainty Will almost believes himself.

“Maybe he was shopping, too. You got too close to him. But he let you live.” Jack says.

“He let me live. Again.”

You’ve been reborn.

Wasn’t that the goal of my therapy?

“But, he has humiliated you. Treated you with contempt.” Pazzi waves his hand over the discarded shackles and the blood soaked ground.

“If that’s what you’re reading into this, you are wrong. Actually, he treated me and Ruggerio with respect. At least to his thinking. Arranging bodies, dead or alive, is not disrespectful to God. His judgement conveyed by the arrangement and treatment of the meat. This…” Will waves his arm in a sweeping gesture, “is merely material to do with as he pleases.”

Pazzi’s large dark eyes engage Will’s, searchingly, so intensely that Will looks away. “You really did get into his head, didn’t you? You don’t just talk about him, you speak from his mind.”

“Rinaldo, I became him.” Will says softly. “Don’t think for a minute that I can ever forget that.” *And neither should you.*

Will turns from Pazzi, leaves him to his thoughts, and speaks to Jack. “Jack, I’d like to look at the preliminary reports. I know you want answers and um…so do I.”

“Well, I guess that takes care of that.” Jack says. “As long as you’re feeling up to it, I won’t say no.”

Jack levels his gaze at Pazzi, relieved the issue is resolved but well aware that Will’s dignity just suffered another blow at Pazzi’s expense. Then again, Jack had not expected Will’s trap for Lecter to ever extend to the bedroom. If it ever was a trap. He glances at Will sitting with head bowed, flexing stiff feet and rolling sore ankles, typically avoiding eye contact and withdrawing as much as possible while he waits for the ambulance and the reports. Pazzi’s continued persecution of Will must be to provoke. But to provoke Will to what, besides decking him, Jack cannot wrap his head around.

Thoughts spin in Jack’s head. Decking him is exactly what Pazzi wants. He at least wants Will to try. Pazzi thinks to draw Will into a private confrontation some place private. So he can grab him up for Mason. Jack already knew that Pazzi would have no qualms about Will becoming collateral damage in snagging Hannibal before finding Ruggerio.

There is the matter of the GPS tracker. Will has not mentioned seeing Du Maurier, but he probably wouldn’t in front of Pazzi. Jack is curious if Will will bring it up when he has the opportunity. If he doesn’t, Jack fears he has lost his only other connection to Hannibal. He’s back to relying on Will and the thought does not set well. He may have to be more forthcoming about Du Maurier in light of these new developments. Hannibal continues to obstruct at every turn. And Du Maurier could be obstructing right beside him.

The possibility that they sipped wine together while creating this tableau becomes more plausible in Jack's mind with every minute. There is a curious callousness in the way Du Maurier speaks of Will evident in the way she refers to him only by his last name, a name she intones like an epithet, or, Jack thinks suddenly, spoken like a declaration of acrimony. Jack thinks he smells the rancor of the rejected suitor on Du Maurier. Or perhaps…the ex-mistress.

"I'll get Ruggerio's report for you and Jack." Pazzi is saying as he turns to leave their little enclave, "Looking forward to your thoughts, Signor Graham."

Will watches him walk away and the thing curls more tightly under his skin. Pazzi is goading him. His talk of a rape kit was just that…talk. Achilles wants Patroclus to allow Agamemnon to deliver him to Antenor. And Agamemnon is practically inviting a one on one confrontation. Menelaus sits beside him observing everything and Menelaus alone has control of the cavalry. Agamemnon will not seek to cover his flank. If Menelaus becomes too aware of what is happening, Patroclus' dreams of a redemptive ending will not come to pass.

Menelaus must be kept in the dark. Patroclus will play into Agamemnon's hands and Achilles will come. Patroclus will at last have his reckoning. No more inferno to plague him. But no garden either. The anticipation of regret lingers like fingers over his heart threatening to squeeze until he bleeds.

"Hold your hands out so we can photograph your wrists" Zee says holding up his camera."

"Oh…right." Will says, running his fingers through his apparently freshly shampooed locks, the tactile sensation at once soothing, grounding him in yet another moment he could do without. He had been so lost in thought he hadn't even noticed Price and Zeller arranging a plastic tarp on the ground for him to sit on.

Will holds out his arms, turns them up, and over realizing they will want to document his ankles, too. Will waits for Zee to position himself at his feet and rolls his eyes in resignation as Zee prompts him to turn over. He's not quite sure how to drape the towel over his backside when Zee relieves him of the worry, sort of.

"Just stretch out without the towel. We need both sides anyway…"

"My portfolio would be incomplete…"

"Well, if it's any consolation, you are really photogenic."

"It's not…" Will says, lying down on his stomach, "any consolation at all."

The pictures do not take but a few seconds and Zee nods that Will's injuries are now documented. He sits back up, grabs the towel to drape over himself again and proceeds to massage the sore tired muscles in his calves, focusing on his fingers while he walks among the fractured images in his mind that grow among the tangle of vines there.

Bedelia…What…have you done now?

What you should have done. Weed your garden.

“How much do you remember, Will?”

“Everything up to the syringe. After that…a lot of dreams. I’m hoping Daniel can help me sort it out.”

Jack nods in agreement. Whatever else Clayton is to Will, Jack is certain he is the only person in Will’s life who can counter Hannibal’s influence. Clayton’s feelings for Will are evident, at least to Jack. Will’s feelings remain elusive. As usual, Will’s mindset is difficult to nail down.

“I’m sure he will. He’s obviously very competent. You did make a good choice selecting him, Will.”

Will looks up from his feet, his fingers pause in the compulsive rhythmic massaging of his ankle, the repetitious touching the most direct and readily available means of summoning some semblance of Daniel’s calming mist. He can almost smell the ocean if he concentrates enough. But, there are constant interruptions and Will will have to wait for the real thing to meet him at the hospital.

He studies Jack’s face as he lifts his head and decides Jack’s impression of Daniel is a positive one. Will did make a good choice in selecting Daniel as his psychiatrist. Will is afraid he has also selected him for extinction.

You won’t kill him. You won’t catch him. What’s left? I’m feeling like the intermediary here. Am I your therapist or your confessor, Will? Or am I the messenger from your inferno? Your conscience, maybe? Because I can’t be that.

The idea was to keep you out of my universe, but…it hasn’t worked out that way.

I’m not going anywhere. You need to decide what I am…to you. I understand that what I want and what you want may not be the same thing. You still need to work that out.

“I think I hear the ambulance pulling up.” Will says turning around.

“Let me have a word with them and I’ll send them over.”

Will nods and calls over his shoulder, “Bring back some water?”

Jack waves his hand through the air and continues on to the ambulance. Will watches the two paramedics, a man and a woman climb out of the front. He clicks his pasty tongue in anticipation of the icy cold water he can almost taste and he thinks of the pitcher of the Roman spring water Daniel keeps in the fridge at home. *Home…* Will feels the smile spreading across his face before he call help it.

Price walks up to Will, kneels down on the tarp as he shuffles through photographs on the laptop he holds in his hands, glancing up at the ambulance every now and then. He holds the laptop out to Will, screen facing out. Will looks at the screen full of images of himself and feels his face go slack. He looks up at Price, lips pinched between teeth.

“Will, don’t take this the wrong way, but…” Price starts, pausing at the raised brows and bracing expression on Will’s face, “You look like you belong in a painting. The lighting, the pose…”

Associations come quickly. “That might not be far off. For me, or Ruggerio.”

“You think…”

"Start looking up Saint Sebastian paintings. Start with Florentine artists, and I'd look for followers of Caravaggio. The artist will be Italian."

"Will!" Jack calls from behind. "They're all set up for you."

"Have you tried standing up?" Price says, setting down the laptop.

"Might not be a bad idea."

"No, no." Jack says, trotting up. "Let them check you out first. Easier to treat you right where you are. Here's your water." Jack tosses Will the wet plastic bottle and he catches it, actually holds it in his grip. Jack nods with approval. "Doing better already."

"Agent Crawford!"

An authoritative yell comes from across the walkway from nearly a quarter a way around the pond. All eyes turn toward the sound and a collective groan escapes from several sour faces as a Polizia officer approaches with the one and only Freddie Lounds. She has the temerity to smile and wave.

The officer holds her tightly by one arm as she walks stiffly beside him, her tiny frame decked in dark green and grey despite the heat, no doubt to blend in with shade and shadow. She shakes the long tresses of bright orange ringlets, her expression defiant as always even as lips curl in wry smile.

"Miss Lounds…"

"Agent Crawford… And Mr. Graham!" she gushes, "My but you sure know how to show someone a good time. Love letters didn't quite do it for you?"

Will holds the towel in place with one hand while slowly raising his other hand and his middle finger.

"I'm curious. Did you get dinner and a movie first? Or did you go straight to where you left off?" Lounds sneers, a devious little smile.

"Found her snapping off pictures from the other side of the fountain. She uses a very expensive and very loaded device." The Polizia officer says. "She shoved it in her purse."

"Give me the camera." Jack holds out his hand.

Lounds rifles through her purse, but Jack nods to the Polizia officer and he grabs it from her.

"Give her back her wallet and keys if she has any, but nothing else. She can come downtown to the precinct and pick the rest up later, right?" Jack says.

"*Nessun problema.*" The officer says, still holding Lounds tight in his grip.

"It won't make any difference." Lounds says, wriggling her arm, "I already uploaded what I had to my website."

Will wants to throttle her, but thinks he would likely fall down if he tried to stand up, so he contents himself with keeping his face blank as he stares at his feet. Ruggerio's family doesn't even know yet.

“What is wrong with you?” Pazzi says, “You have no respect for the dead?”

“If journalists received some respect, we wouldn’t have to resort to this behavior.” Lounds snaps back. “I didn’t post your detective. He’s in a cloud file…for tomorrow.”

“A journalist…is not what you are.” Jack says, “Get her out of here.”

“You can escort Signorina Lounds all the way to her hotel if you think it necessary.” Adds Pazzi.

Jack’s head turns as does Will’s. They both look hard at Pazzi at the same time. Jack immediately suspects Pazzi conspired with her and Will must be thinking the same thing. At least entertaining the idea. Pazzi could be trying to intimidate her, but Jack does not put it past him to use Lounds. For all he knows the Polizia officer will be collecting on his payment at the hotel. Pazzi could be using her to slip information to the Paolini and Verger so that leaks are not traced to him.

“That won’t be necessary.” Lounds says as the officer shakes her arm, impatient to leave. “I can find my way back to my room where my computer is. I’ll be posting an update soon.”

“Careful, Miss Lounds. You might provoke someone who was very distressed to learn you were still alive.” Will says.

“Will…” Jack starts, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“No one knows better than you.” Lounds retorts. “And thank you Mr. Graham…” the officer jerks her about face and begins to stride away.

Will stares at her, lips drawn in a thin line and pursed tightly so he doesn’t say anything else. C*oulda, woulda, shoulda…*

Jack nods and the officer resumes dragging Lounds from the ambulance and the crime scene.

Lounds turns her head to call over shoulder, “Thanks for the photo shoot. My readers will be enthralled. Too bad I have to tell them you are spoken for…”

The officer yanks her hard, and Lounds stumbles after him, miraculously managing to stay perched atop the high heeled boots. Shoving aside thoughts of the potentially damaging if not revealing photographs he cannot do anything about, Will exchanges a look with Jack. Jack glances again at the retreating Lounds and takes out his phone, texting as he speaks. It won’t hurt to have an additional FBI escort to help Miss Lounds find her car or a taxi.

“Where were we?” Jack says.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 73

Will and Hannibal are quoting from the King James Version of the Holy Bible, Genesis, Chapter 3 and referring to passages in the New English Bible with the Apocrypha, also Genesis, Chapter 3. The Apocrypha offers a more detailed version of events in the Bible, including events in Eden.

Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

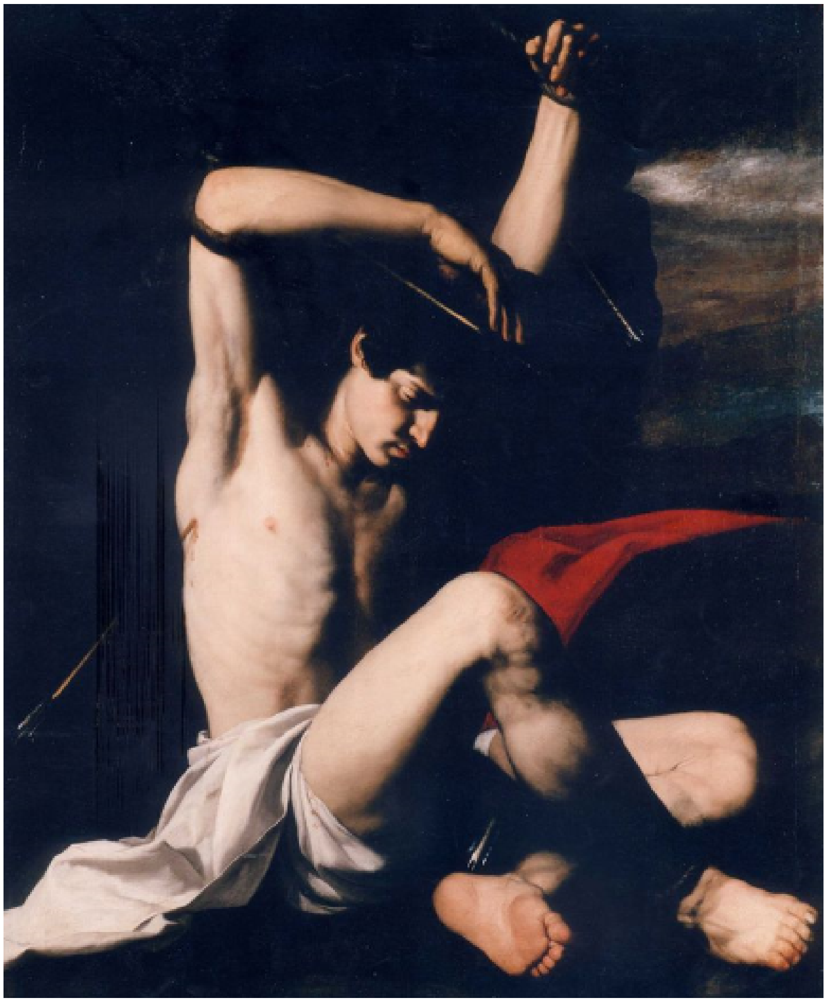
> Will finishes up at the crime scene. Hannibal and Daniel have breakfast, one psychiatrist to another and deal with a surprise visitor.
>
> Hannibal waits until Clayton has passed behind him before he speaks. “I had dinner with Will last night.”
>
> He listens as the scraping of shoes across the Berber carpet halts. A moment passes, a pregnant pause, uncomfortable for its duration not its silence.
>
> “How was it?” Daniel says mildly.
>
> “Almost like old times but of course it wasn’t. He didn’t finish dessert, but he seemed to enjoy the rest of the meal.”
>
> “Cleaned his plate?”
>
> Daniel’s fingers curl into fists as he stands motionless behind Hannibal. Hannibal would not lie to him about this. Telling the truth is far more devastating and Hannibal knows it.
>
> “Sopped up the sauce with his bread. Voracious appetite. I think he missed my cooking.”

Chapter Notes

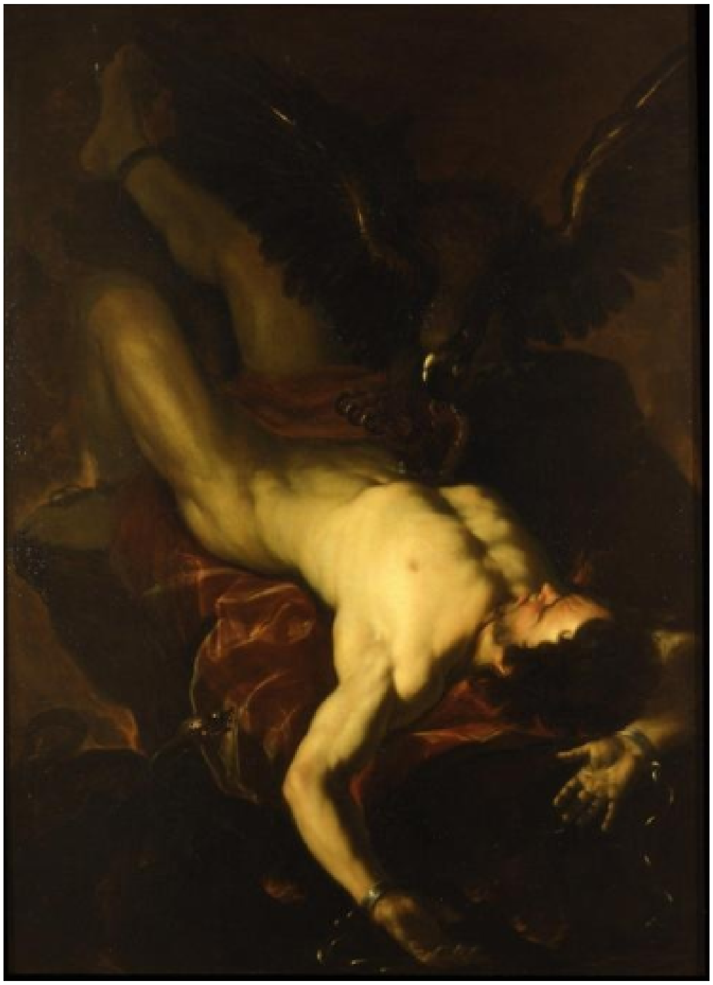
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 74

Will finishes up at the crime scene. Hannibal and Daniel have breakfast, one psychiatrist to another and deal with a surprise visitor.



Saint Sebastian, Antonio de Bellis, c.1650



Prometheus Bound, Luca Giordano, 1660

Envoi (prayer)

Glory and praise to Thee, Satan, on high, Where Thou didst reign, in Hell where Thou dost lie, Vanquished, silent, dreaming eternally. Grant that my soul someday rest close to Thee Under the Tree of Knowledge which shall spread Its branches like a Temple overhead.

Fleurs du Mal, Litanies of Satan, Charles Baudelaire translated by Jacques LeClercq, (Mt Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1958)

Not soon enough, Will is seated at the back of the ambulance, looking out from the open back over the crime scene wearing a hospital gown, legs dangling over the bumper. Lounds is but a footnote to a very exhausting morning. The paramedics have provided him with a cursory once over, and are monitoring his vitals as he sits sipping at a water bottle. He doesn't want to, but he has to go to the hospital so a proper M.D. can sign off on him for the FBI.

He holds a tablet in his hands and he scrolls the image upon the screen up and down as he glances at Ruggerio. Pazzi's preliminary report of Ruggerio's crime scene rests opened beside him and although Will already knows how Ruggerio died, analyzing Hannibal's tableau requires a little research and imagination.

"What are you thinking, Will?" Jack says as he and Pazzi amble over, Pazzi trailing behind Jack.

Behind Pazzi trails a middle aged man Will has not seen before. His tailored suit, clipped hair, and authoritative demeanor suggest but one thing. Interpol. Will thinks it about time they made an appearance and the circumstances of Ruggerio's death certainly invited it. The effect of the Interpol liaison on Pazzi should be interesting.

"This is Inspector Santo with Interpol." Jack announces.

Introductions quickly follow, but it is apparent that Santo prefers to observe for the moment rather than contribute.

"You said you think Ruggerio was posed as Santo Sebastiano?" Pazzi asks.

"With nearly a hundred percent certainty, yes."

"No Greek references? Those are not Cupid's arrows?"

Will does not even look up from his tablet and file. "Eros inspires either passionate love or aversion, depending on which type of arrow he sends. No one ever dies because of his arrows, but the passion or the aversion indirectly plays a part in what happens to the individual struck."

"Has Lecter ever placed Christian references into his tableau before?"

"Captain Pazzi, he is playing God all the time. This…is an overt reference to a singular saint especially for Detective Ruggerio. Usually he is mocking God, but in this instance, Ruggerio's Catholic beliefs are part of the monument, a central motif."

"You talk about this homicide like it is a work of art."

"Because to Hannibal, it is."

"He's not punishing Ruggerio like he did the Paolini." Jack says. "Your detective has been treated with respect, Capitano, trust me on that."

"He was eviscerated from the back. Aesthetics." Will says. "The organs were taken out and displayed in a river of viscera to me, substituting his liver for mine."

"The organs are in pieces." Pazzi says, "How is that respectful?"

Will looks up and shrugs apologetically, "To keep you guessing which organs he took. Which may be significant, or not. But Ruggerio's front is intact, unblemished to meet his maker. I suspect he took the kidneys since he opened him up from the back. Kidneys are right there, you have to take them out first to get to the rest."

"We have recovered no kidneys yet." Pazzi says with a sigh, "And he took flesh from beneath his shoulder blades."

"The oysters." Will says.

"Come again?"

"One of the more tender cuts of meat. The small circle of flesh under the shoulder blades. A token of esteem."

Pazzi looks to Santo who raises a brow but remains quiet. Pazzi throws up his hands in a helpless gesture and pulls out his pack of cigarettes. A fresh pack. Will wonders how many packs Pazzi smokes in a day, especially a day like today. Will figures Pazzi might not be able to pass a physical and he certainly can't run too far without gasping for air.

Zeller and Price walk up bearing their laptops. "We're all set, Will." Price says.

"You found a Saint Sebastian that matches?"

"Oh yeah. Found you, too." Zee says.

Will raises his brows, but says nothing. Hannibal's knowledge of art and literature is extensive, especially the Renaissance. There were prints on display in his home in Baltimore bearing Will's likeness, or an approximation of it. Hannibal never seemed to tire of Will's eye rolls and groans every time he had been presented with one of them. Will thinks he never took the time to try and find one of Hannibal. Perhaps someday… Will bites his lip. Someday is just a euphemism for never, isn't it?

"You, too? Which Saint are you?" Jack asks.

"Oh…I'm no saint. Those feathers…we're thinking they're eagle feathers?" Will looks to Zee.

"Uh, yeah. We'll have to look more closely at the lab, not sure which species, or if the feathers are local, but they are predator feathers. If not eagle then hawk. But, you're probably right."

"What's the significance of eagle feathers?"

"A clue to my identity. I think I've got enough to go on to analyze both before they drag me to the hospital."

"Let's have it. Ruggerio is Saint Sebastian and you are…"

"Prometheus."

"Prometheus?" Pazzi says, "I was thinking your counterpart from the *Iliad*. At least a scene from the inspiration for your epic romance."

He decides to play nice with Pazzi, disarm him with kindness. Indulge him. Like Hannibal would.

"I guess like most people, you've never read the entire poem. There is no scene in the *Iliad* where Patroclus…that would be me…is bound to rocks." Will turns to Jack, "Did you find out if that rock I was chained to was already here?"

"It was, but it was moved, rather rolled closer to you from another location, not too far. He had to improvise a bit. No one grove of trees had all the elements he wanted."

"And what he wanted was the theatrical lighting of the morning sun to provide the intense chiaroscuro effect, like the later Renaissance artists. He places his tableau facing east, toward the rising sun, Apollo. He also places it near Neptune, and his giant fork, who is Poseidon in Greek mythology, brother to Jupiter or Zeus. Christ is associated with light and the rising sun and so was Apollo. A lot of Apollo's attributes are assigned to Christ. Apollo was the son of Zeus as Christ is the son of God. So we've got our classical references mixed in with Christian sainthood and values.

Classicism and Christianity. He's using Renaissance ideals to frame his messages." Will turns to Price, "Show them the Saint Sebastian."

"Got it right here."

Price holds up his laptop and mouths drop all around. The resemblance to Ruggerio is undeniable. Body type is similar, musculature and weight most notably. Ruggerio's hair is shorter, but the facial features are remarkably comparable. Especially the decidedly Roman nose that must be a family trait.

"That's…pretty amazing." Pazzi says, dumbfounded.

"The painting is by Antonio de Bellis, from Naples." Price begins, "A Carravagio disciple and deeply influenced by his contemporary Guiseppe Ribera, Spanish artist, similar style to Caravaggio. It's dated 1650. Except for the extra arrow through the torso Lecter decided he needed to stake him to the tree, he followed the pattern from the painting nearly exactly."

"Did he choose Saint Sebastian because Ruggerio looks like the saint in the painting?"

"That was incidental, I think. He didn't choose Ruggerio as a victim. Circumstances did. Ruggerio's likeness to this particular rendering is a convergence of circumstance." Will says. "Saint Sebastian is a popular subject. Lots of paintings of him to choose from. Renaissance artists used local models. Ruggerio is Italian. Sebastian wasn't a police officer, but he was a Roman soldier. His conversion to Christianity was discovered and he was killed on the job so to speak. He was shot with arrows like this first, but he survived. Went back. They clubbed him to death the second time. He's always posed as a martyr with arrows, more aesthetically pleasing than a clubbing."

"So he died doing his job." Jack says, raising a brow at Pazzi.

"He was a sacrifice. And his blood is on me. Literally. For bringing him into this. But, he was doing his job. As dedicated to the Polizia as Sebastian was to God."

"But ah, Signor Graham" Santo says quietly from behind Pazzi, "You didn't know Ruggerio was following you. Did you?"

"I did not." Will says.

"Then why blame you?"

"It's not blame being assigned to me. Not directly." Will turns to Jack. "It's like Beverly. We found dots to connect Hannibal to the Ripper. I told her to take the dots to you. She went to his house instead, to find more than dots. The evidence was lost. My dots and words rendered meaningless. My actions indirectly caused the sacrifice. I feel the guilt regardless."

"Captain Pazzi sent Ruggerio." Santo says, "Seems to me circumstances suggest that Lecter knew you did not know Ruggerio was following you, otherwise, he would have made a tableau that reflected that you knew. He seems capable of communicating his ideas very well."

"He is very capable." Will agrees.

"We have only your word that you didn't know. And if I had sent D'Angelo instead of Ruggerio?" Pazzi asks, tone as casual as the flicking of the ash from his cigarette, but Will knows better.

“Plenty of female saints, aren’t there?” Will asks in answer, just as casually. “Ruggerio is a sacrifice on the altar of duty. How many more sacrifices are you willing to make?”

Pazzi’s only response is to proffer a smile as inviting as poison. Will thinks Hannibal would be proud.

“The resemblance to Ruggerio is striking. Lecter is showing off his classical education. He apparently posed as a professor at the Uffizi?” Santo says.

“Apparently.” Will says, figuring the Polizia wasted no time checking out the Uffizi. “He wanted to be found there. Sent a clue by knocking out an officer named Buccieri at one of the crime scenes. I found the name Boucher too coincidental to pass up.”

“But you didn’t share that information with your superiors?”

“No.” Will says, eyes lowered, tone deferential. “I have a unique relationship with Lecter. If I had found him, I wanted to find him alone. Had I been alone this time, we would not be here.”

“What do you think would have happened, Signor Graham? If you had found him alone?” Santo says, angling his head so that Will cannot avoid looking at him.

“I honestly do not know. But a little chat between us is long overdue.”

“No time to talk while gutting Paolini?” Santo says.

“Not really.”

“Will is here on my authority.” Jack says, tossing an icy glance in Will’s direction. “I knew he went to the Uffizi and I knew why. Our working relationship requires a little autonomy.”

“I think maybe too much. I have been informed of your little autonomy, Agent Crawford.” Santo says, eyes creasing slightly and Jack infers from the tic of his lids that Kade Purnell has been whispering in his ear. Probably more like shrieking. The Paolini massacre did not help.

“Who owns the painting?” Will asks. “Where is it located?”

“Currently owned by the Pier Luigi Pizzi Collection in Venice. Why?”

“Hannibal owns originals of some works. I’m sure not everything he owns was in Baltimore. He has more than a passing familiarity with Renaissance art. Which is why I went to the Uffizi. A lot of the prints in his home were paintings in the Uffizi.”

“How does a person have time to earn a medical degree, obtain a license to practice psychiatry, get published, and become an art historian and connoisseur?” Price asks, looking around at everyone.

“And a chef. Don’t forget chef.” Will says.

“And that other hobby…oh yeah, serial killer.” Zee adds.

“You all admire him or something?” Pazzi looks around in disbelief.

“Just a little American humor.” Jack says, “Eases tension.”

Pazzi turns to Will, expression serious, “So with all this background on Saint Sebastian, Lecter is paying Ruggerio homage? Because he left him like this instead of like the Paolini?”

“Right.” Will says. “He is using all the hallmarks of the Renaissance to pay his respects. He warned the Polizia to keep out of the FBI hunt for him. He left Buccieri alive, remember?”

Pazzi is quiet and Will lets him remunerate while he continues, “Ruggerio was a threat. And like Saint Sebastian, Ruggerio wasn’t killed by the arrows either. Hannibal did not stand out here in the dark and shoot arrows at him. He broke his neck, quick, efficient, almost painless.”

“And you?” Pazzi asks, sucking on a cigarette, “How is he paying respect to you?”

“He let me live and I wouldn’t characterize that as respect. Ruggerio died in the line of duty. Hannibal has elevated him to sainthood. I, like Prometheus, have not been elevated at all.”

“What was the story of Prometheus? More Greek mythology I clearly need to brush up on.” Jack says.

“Oh, let me.” Price exclaims. “Did you find a corresponding painting for Will?” Price looks to Zee.

“Sure did. This one is a dead ringer, too.”

“Was that a…pun?” Will asks.

Zee responds with a shake of his head and turns his laptop for everyone to see. Everyone turns to look at Will and back to the screen. Pazzi whistles softly, drops his cigarette and grinds his foot absently while he looks. Will stares at the image on the screen. The young Prometheus does resemble him, more than a little. The musculature is exaggerated for effect, but the pose and the face, including beard and hair, are more than a little familiar.

“How did he find these? I mean that’s a huge rolodex of a memory he’s got upstairs. Or do you think he went online?”

“Who knows? It’s clever. It amused him to do it.” Will says. “Who’s the artist?”

“Luca Giordano. A pupil of Guiseppe Ribera, and another Caravaggio admirer.”

“Caravaggio is a favorite artist. It’s not surprising he would be familiar with the work of artists who worked in the same style. Or that they would be from the same century. What’s the date?”

“1660.” Zee says, “And get this, before you ask, this Giordano painting, *Prometheus Bound* is currently part of an exhibition in London, and it is on loan from a private and unnamed collection. How about that, huh?”

“That is interesting.” Jack says, “Anything else about the painter?”

“One other thing. Giordano was known for his portrayals of the more disturbing and gruesome tales of the Bible and from mythology.”

“And you knew you were Prometheus because…?” Pazzi asks.

“The liver, the feathers, and the chained to the rock motif.” Will says.

“Prometheus was not a martyr, he was a classical figure. An allegory of hubris.” Pazzi says.

“Mortal or God?” Jack asks.

“Titan.” Price says and pauses when he looks at Jack’s peevish expression. “He was one of the older gods, like Cronus. Brother to Atlas, the one who holds the world on his shoulders?”

“Just continue.” Jack says.

“The Titans are defeated by the Olympians, led by Zeus. Prometheus was clever enough to stay out of it and is the god who molded man from clay and some myths say that Athena breathed life into him. Prometheus also played a couple tricks on Zeus for the benefit of his creation and he was punished for it.”

“So even though he’s a god, he is subject to Zeus’ authority.” Jack says.

Jack stands silent a moment, absorbing Price’s brief explanation. He turns to Will, his own associations spinning around.

“What tricks did he play, Will?”

Will sighs and offers Jack a knowing raise of his brows. “Tricks of deception. First time, he tricks Zeus into accepting a sacrifice of bones and fat so man could keep the flesh for himself and the gods would have to accept the rest. Zeus was angry and he took fire away from man. Then Prometheus steals fire back from the gods and gives the gift to man. Zeus chains him to rocks and every day an eagle comes and eats his liver. Every night it grows back. This goes on in perpetuity.”

“The parallels are significant, wouldn’t you say?”

“But Hercules eventually rescues poor Prometheus. One his twelve labors.” Price says.

“True , but I don’t see where that part of the story fits in, except that Prometheus was rescued. As I was.” Will smiles.

“Zeus punished Prometheus like God punished Adam. Deceit and disobedience. Another parallel that relates to Rodin’s *Gates.* If Rodin intended the *Thinker* to be Adam…” Zee says.

“Prometheus was both creator and punished as one of those he created.” Will says. “The myth of Prometheus’ defiance of Zeus was a classical motif Renaissance artists and philosophers used to bridge classical ideals with Christian ideals. The parallels with God and Adam struck a chord.”

“Just wait a minute. Let’s not clutter up this crime scene with the others just yet. So what’s he doing here, Will? What is, are, the messages?”

“Basically? He has made a saint of Ruggerio. I think Hannibal would have left the Polizia alone except for this. I think he regretted having to do it…as much as Hannibal regrets anything. He has to know what killing a cop means for him. As for me, like Zeus, rather than kill me outright for my deception, he would rather punish me…forever.”

Jack does not doubt that Hannibal is attempting to manipulate Will’s emotions. He knows how Will’s empathy works, at least as well as Will does. Even if Will had no idea Ruggerio was following him, Will would feel responsible for his death. If Will had played any part in it, Jack hopes Will would feel responsible.

Jack notices one of the paramedics waving at him that they are ready to pack up and take Will to the Ospidale di Careggi. Jack takes a swig of water from his bottle as he stands observing Will. Even though he is surrounded by people, he seems alone. His gaze is distant, and the hospital gown makes him appear smaller somehow. This is not the worst Will has been through and Jack wants to believe that Will has it in him to continue fighting his demons. Jack glances at his watch and realizes they have been here a little over an hour. It feels like days. Will must feel like he has been dragged over bad road for days.

"Will." Jack says quietly tapping him on the shoulder. "Time to go. I'm going to dismiss everyone and we'll see you later. I'll uh, bring you a phone when I stop in."

"Thanks, Jack." Will nods, "I'm uh…I could do with a little space and solitude."

As Will is helped into one of the stretchers in the back of the ambulance he considers the concept of trust. He has told Jack that Hannibal's intentions are to punish him for his deceit rather than kill him. Wouldn't it be just like Hannibal to do that right under his nose? Hannibal has always played him it seems. And Will plays Hannibal right back. He is playing Hannibal now. Sins of omission are still being served up as deceit.

Does Patroclus trust Achilles?

Does Achilles trust Patroclus?

Daniel slams the car door shut leaving his Mercedes in its usual spot alongside his office. He made good time. He hung up to Jack Crawford and then Hannibal less than an hour ago. And made a stop for breakfast, too. His temporary replacement Doctor Lorenzo will not be here for a couple hours and Daniel had thought to call ahead to Maria to ask her to check Lorenzo's calendar and see about cancelling a morning appointment or two, but had taken half a valium to calm down realizing he was thinking in panic mode. A call like that would have set off alarms in Maria's head. He can only imagine what Maria would have thought of him trying to cancel another psychiatrist's appointments. What had he been thinking?

As he reaches for the cardboard tray containing two large coffees and a paper bag stuffed with breakfast he hopes Doctor Lorenzo likes it here. He thinks it may be some time before he returns, if he ever does. The office and his home now hold too many memories of what he cannot have. He feels like he has been living in a dream for weeks. Life had never seemed so frantic or frenetic before meeting Will.

Since meeting Will, his life has been completely turned upside down, like being swept up in a tornado that never quite touches the ground. He exists in a constant whirlwind of adrenaline inducing terror, powerful emotions and the most passionate sex he has ever experienced. No wonder Will insists he has never felt more alive than when he was with Hannibal. Daniel can relate. He has never felt more alive than when he is with Will.

He rounds the building and enters through the back entrance, palms already perspiring, and trails of sweat roll along his spine. Barely past seven and already he hears the piped in music from clear back in the kitchenette Maria is playing it so loudly. There's sugar and creamer in his office he remembers as he passes through the kitchenette and straight into the lobby where he expects to find his former patient, but Hannibal is not there.

“Maria?” Daniel calls out, a knotting of dread clenches in his gut as he glances at his watch thinking he had not taken that long to get here.

Maria appears from around one of the pillars in the lobby, paper towels and glass cleaner in her hands. She was wiping down the curio cabinet. Daniel blinks and stops holding his breath.

“Just touching up. Your patient went upstairs. He said you told him it was okay to wait for you in your office.”

“Um…yeah. Okay. Well, I’ll just go on up then.” Daniel pauses, remembering he should be social. He hasn’t see Maria or any of his staff in several days. Has it only been days?”

“Good to see you, Maria.” He says forcing a smile that becomes genuine the longer it stays plastered on his face.

“Likewise. They’ve have been keeping you busy, eh? And Mr. Graham, too?”

“Very busy. But educational. I think I prefer analyzing live people.”

Maria looks him up and down and a frown dips along her mouth. He knows how he must appear. He looked at himself in the mirror this morning. He looks tired, stressed, and a little wild. When he looks in the mirror shades of Will peer back at him, the same haunted visage that had caused the tugging in his chest the first time Will had walked through his door has now taken up residence on his own face.

But Maria holds her tongue somehow sensing that her maternal instincts might not be welcomed this morning.

“We all hope you come back soon. We miss you, it’s not the same of course and Signora Lorenzo is uh…not a morning person.”

“Oh? How’s that?”

“She barely talks until after the second patient of the day. I thought *you* drank a lot of coffee…”

“What time does she usually start?”

“As early as eight, but not today. First patient is nine-thirty.”

“Well, I should be gone before then. Better get upstairs before the coffee gets cold…”

“I think this will be the last you see of Doctor Boucher.” Maria calls after him as he begins to mount the back stairway.

Daniel freezes. “Why? What did he say?”

“He mentioned he was taking a trip and didn’t know when he’d back in Florence. But he sounded so sad when he said it. I think he brought you a thank you present. What a sweet man. So thoughtful.”

“Isn’t he, though?” Daniel says, “You going to be downstairs for a while?”

“Oh yes. Plenty to do…thanks to Lorenzo. Please…come back soon.” She pleads holding her hands together, prayer-like.

“I miss you, too, Maria.” Daniel smiles broadly again at her before climbing the stairs.

As he climbs he slows a little giving himself time to think. He’s still considering how best to approach Hannibal. He tries to reconcile his sessions with Victor with the man he knows from Will’s perspective. They are the same person; it is Daniel’s perception of that person that has changed. Should he approach Hannibal as he had before, resume a doctor patient dynamic? Will the atmosphere hang thickly about the two of them as they circle his office like adversaries? Whatever position or attitude he assumes he will still be at a disadvantage. This man on the other side of the door ripped Will apart, emotionally and physically. And Will is mentally much stronger than he is.

Daniel takes a deep breath. Hannibal has already decided upon his approach and Daniel will discover what it is when he opens the door.

He hesitates as he stands before the door to his own office, the familiar suddenly unfamiliar, alien. The thought occurs that Hannibal chose this location to offer him a comfort zone. Not an advantage so much as an acknowledgment of their brief but highly charged history. While the location must offer some degree of convenience for him, otherwise he would not have suggested meeting here in the first place, Hannibal is meeting him on his own turf, a gesture Daniel hopes is meant to appease not offend.

He can choose to look at this as a breach of his space, an invasion of his territory, or he can be welcoming and appeal to Hannibal’s sense of propriety and social grace. Hannibal did ask him to bring food. Sharing a meal is a social activity between friends, not enemies; the gesture of breaking bread together is not lost on Daniel. He brought a loaf in hopes of underscoring that intent. He does have one advantage that Hannibal does not. He can read Hannibal’s emotions. No matter the body language or the expression on his face, Daniel is a living Geiger counter, able to detect the subtlest of emotions no matter how deeply they dwell in the toxic creature waiting for him in his office.

He turns the knob slowly allowing Hannibal to notice his arrival, though Daniel suspects he has already smelled him through the walls and floor, and pushes the door open with his foot carefully balancing the tray of coffee and breakfast in the other. Time seems to stop and Daniel feels like he is floating in ether.

He finds Hannibal examining his bookcase of course. He stands before the large print of Cape Henlopen’s shores from home; the photograph commemorating his flirtation with suicide by the sea.

Violins and a slow parade of piano notes streams from the sound system, Schubert’s *Adagio, Nocturne in E flat* if he remembers correctly. A tumbler of water sits on a coaster upon the coffee table, and a terry towel from the bathroom has been laid out in lieu of a table cloth. Paper plates and plastic utensils from downstairs have been placed on the towel.

A large paper bag rests on one of the couches and an ecru colored summer jacket hangs from the back of his desk chair. Hannibal has had almost an hour to make himself at home, and he certainly has. One would think it his office, not the other way around.

Hannibal is a force of nature, a predator, Daniel reminds himself. To expect the animal pacing in his office not to piss everywhere would be naïve. To expect the intelligent psychopath strolling around his office not to inspect its contents would be equally naïve. In his own way, Hannibal has been profiling him. As Will had done. Except that Daniel had invited Will to do so.

He is dressed simply but meticulously. Dark blue twill trousers fit snugly over long legs, pale blue pressed button down shirt tucked in so the sleek leather belt is visible, accentuating trim waist and broad shoulders, the shirt perfectly tailored to accommodate the toned musculature beneath its folds. Daniel thinks he must have stopped by his dry cleaner's on his way from the crime scene. Daniel can picture him just walking in and presenting his ticket for clothes he had left the day before anticipating he would need something to wear without blood splashed all over it.

He does not look like a man being hunted by the FBI and the Firenze Policia for murdering one of their detectives this morning. In fact, he does not appear perturbed by anything at all. Hannibal feels to Daniel the same as before, when Victor stood before his curio cabinet downstairs; a mildly curious wrinkle upon his lips in a sea of calm. He stands with a book in his hands like he has all the time in the world. He shoves the art book back into its place on the shelf and turns away from the bookcases to greet Daniel. The air in the room stills and Daniel swears he hears his heart hammering away as he is swallowed up in the gaze from across the room.

Hannibal lifts his head, his smile grows warm as he crosses the room and promptly relieves Daniel of his burden before his trembling sends the flimsy cardboard tray tumbling to the floor. No spills this time he thinks as Hannibal's fingers graze his, sparking an array of tiny shocks along every nerve.

"Buongiorno, Doctor Clayton. So good to see you again."

"Doctor…" Daniel leaves it at that, not sure how to address Hannibal.

"Let's close the door." Hannibal says shutting it with a soft thud and locking it. "We can talk freely now. One of the reasons I chose to meet you here. Thank you for the courtesy of agreeing to come."

"Sure…"

Hannibal glances at Clayton as he sets the tray on the table. Clayton is nervous as a mouse caught in a trap, which of course, is exactly what he is. But, Clayton is a clever mouse, and Hannibal would like to put him at ease so they can talk. Clayton is also a very pretty mouse. He is again struck by the resemblance to Will, even more so now that Clayton is not wearing his professional suit – the actual attire or the mindset.

He is on his way to the hospital to see Will, to bring him clothes no doubt, and he is dressed casually although stylishly like he just walked out of trendy catalogue. His abrasions have healed since Hannibal saw him last, barely a trace of discomfort registers from his encounter with Luciano as he walks over to stand on the other side of the coffee table. Hannibal watches him wet his lips as he edits what he is about to say, just like Will does, and he thinks of Will likely still trapped in his tableau, still caught in the fetters of his inferno. He wonders if he's gotten himself free of his bonds yet, the literal and the mental.

"I suppose you have questions about Will. I doubt Jack Crawford offered much despite you've taken a leave of absence from your practice to help them catch me."

“I took the leave of absence to help Will.” Daniel says looking furtively about his office, quickly noticing the laptop on his desk has been turned on. “Did you get into my computer?”

“Only to access the internet. I follow Tattle Crime, especially since I am often in its headlines.”

Daniel sighs, scratches at the scruff under his chin. “Is it…still up?”

“Just for you.”

Daniel crosses the room to have a look. Hannibal waits at the coffee table. The photographs were clearly shot in quick succession. Daniel thinks Lounds must have had a telephoto lens. He scans the few photos quickly, observes the view behind Will has been cropped and darkened, and a similar treatment performed on Will, his lower half in deep shadow. Daniel stands leaning over the laptop speechless. The pose. The chains. The gore being plucked off Will’s body by Zeller and Price. The ingenuity to pull it off in the middle of the night…

“What do you see?” Hannibal asks suddenly over his shoulder.

Daniel nearly jumps out of his skin. “What do I…?” Daniel realizes Hannibal wants him to see his tableau as Will does. Or try to. Daniel feels like Hannibal just handed him a test. To compare his score with Will’s.

“I see you chained him to the ground, one leg over a rock… Dropped organs on him. Which organs?”

“A mixed grill, but mostly liver.”

Daniel rubs his face and continues looking. “Feathers?”

“Eagle feathers.”

“Where do you find eagle feathers on short notice?”

“Natural history museums, illegal markets, or…from one of Du Maurier’s hats.”

Daniel turns around to Hannibal to find his mouth turned up in a self-satisfied smile, eyes bright. “Why would you tell me that?”

“So you can tell Will. He won’t remember the conversation, but Doctor Du Maurier is actually to blame for the circumstances resulting in Will’s appearance in Ruggerio’s tableau. You can’t see him, but he’s just behind Will.”

“How is she to…”

Hannibal shakes his finger at Daniel, “First things first. Tell me what you see.”

Sighing again, Daniel returns his gaze to the screen. “You staged this as an allegorical reference. Will is alive. He represents someone alive. Chains, rocks, liver, and eagle feathers. Feathers because even you couldn’t find an eagle, live or stuffed in such a short time. You made him Prometheus.”

“Excellent. An eagle would have been a bit over the top don’t you think?” Hannibal turns to walk back to the coffee table and breakfast. “Coffee’s getting cold.”

Daniel remains at the computer, reading Tattle Crime before he does. “Her post described the other victim without naming him. Ruggerio was pierced with arrows, strung up to a tree trunk. Left nude like Will. Classical treatment of another Greek myth?”

“No. Christian myth. If you click on the next tab, you’ll see the paintings that inspired me.”

Daniel’s mouth falls open as he stares at the paintings Hannibal selected. The crime scene and the paintings are nearly identical. The resemblance to Will and Ruggerio is eerily similar; a visual reinforcement to the obvious analogies Hannibal has drawn. At least the analogies are obvious to Daniel. Saint Angelo and Naughty Will. Oddly, Daniel finds himself obsessing on Lounds’ insensitivity at uploading all this. Her capacity to mercilessly exploit in her pursuit of celebrity and recognition is salt in the wound.

When Ruggerio’s family eventually sees the photos she will surely post…

Hannibal observes the expressions on Clayton’s handsome face as he clicks back and forth between the tabs. He recognizes the shock and the compassion in the creased eyes and the downturned mouth. He also recognizes a mind at work when he sees one, and though Clayton is upset by what he sees, he is still capable of rational thought. Hannibal thinks him beyond rational thought. As he stands staring at the laptop screen, intelligence and imagination spark behind green eyes, the same spark he often sees in a pair of pale blue eyes.

“May I?”

Daniel looks up, startled. Hannibal gestures to the paper bag and begins to unpack it without an answer like he had unpacked his coolers before. Daniel steps out from behind his desk and offers the perfunctory nod, head still reeling from the crime scene and that Hannibal is actually here, in his lovely blue office, leaning over his coffee table unpacking breakfast, again. But this time, Daniel chose the menu.

“Let’s see…we have fresh fruit. Good choice.” Hannibal says peering into the bag and taking out the containers one by one.

“Peaches, mangoes, and grapes.”

Daniel stuffs his hands in the pockets of his jeans as he watches Hannibal pull items from the bag and set them on the towel. He feels like he is watching a dream. His jaw tightens as he steels himself against being swept away in the unreality. Hannibal did not come here to hurt him. He needs to be awake, aware, and proactive….not reactive. Not with Hannibal.

“Personal favorites? Or prepackaged, selected for you?”

“Mine.”

Hannibal smiles and continues to empty the bag. “Cheese…asiago?”

“And very sharp provolone.”

“Excellent. Salami…Genoa?”

“Right again.”

“And…” Hannibal pulls out a loaf of bread, “Local bread. Pane casalingo?”

“Very good. Like a lot of Tuscan bread there’s no salt in it, but I brought some flavored olive oil.”

“You’ve adapted to your surroundings, adopted the culture as your own.”

Hannibal pauses in his emptying of the bag. He allows Clayton time to consider the verity of the observation, apply it to his analogous relationship with Will.

“I have adapted, yes,” Daniel says, thinking Hannibal has wasted no time picking his brain, “but adopting the culture requires truly understanding the culture, absorbing it, making it your own. I think I have adopted facets of the culture. The entirety of it still escapes me.”

The hairs along the back of Daniel’s neck prick up with the vibration of excitement he feels quicken within Hannibal. The air tingles with it, a crackling of molecules as the predator plays with his prey. And the excitement swells within Daniel, too. An unfurling of primal emotions, dangerous and delicious, ripples through him. The sensation of dancing with the devil like a shot of opium he thinks Will found impossible to resist.

“The act of adoption denotes approval. It is a conscious decision. The word is derived from old French, *adoptare*.”

“To choose for oneself. Yes.”

Clayton stretches his arm out over the coffee table in a gentle sweeping gesture, flicking his wrist up to hold his hand over the items strewn over it. Hannibal’s eyes widen as he sees the arm of Michelangelo’s Adam from the Sistine Chapel reaching across the clouds to him. Hannibal extends his own arm across the table, lifts his index finger toward Clayton’s outstretched hand curious what Clayton will do.

Hannibal’s finger nearly touches his and an image of Sistine Chapel’s ceiling comes hurtling into his head. Another shot of devil’s opium to his system. “I have adopted only what I can digest.” Daniel says.

He drops his hand and shoves it back in his pocket, feeling a flush of heat and wonders at the heightened sense of self he is experiencing. He feels like he has entered another plane of existence, as though Hannibal has brought with him another dimension where mind and body become as words and thoughts are transcribed to flesh.

Hannibal withdraws his hand, and with it his spontaneous invitation, to draw the finger over his lips instead as he contemplates the intriguing doctor wetting moist pink lips on the other side of the coffee table.

“Do you know why Tuscan breads have no salt?”

“Oh, yeah.” Daniel smiles a little as he meets Hannibal’s eyes and takes a step closer to the table, grateful to talk about something…concrete.

“The Florentines typically ticked off the pope and he cut off their salt trade. Rather than capitulate, the people went about their business and made their food without salt. When they finally got their salt back, they continued to make the bread salt free out of defiance. It’s actually flavorful without it. This loaf is made with potato flour and the flavor is mild but kind of sweet. Goes well with the other stuff…”

Daniel stops abruptly, remembering who it is he is talking to. He lifts his eyes from the loaf of bread to meet Hannibal's dark eyes, shiny orbs that seem to look right into him. The dark eyes linger a moment longer before Hannibal drops his gaze and pulls the bottle of olive oil from the bag. He reads the label and noticing the bottle is not quite full he opens it, sniffs.

"You didn't purchase this this morning. The seal is already cracked."

Daniel smiles. "I brought it from home. Will…opened it a couple nights ago. Over dinner."

Daniel watches Hannibal carefully. His face freezes a second, expression unreadable but Daniel feels the longing, and the quick cold pang of jealousy that accompanies it. He had brought the oil deliberately precisely for this purpose. To catch Hannibal off guard, to get an honest read on him, to know his true feelings before he could shield them in the block of ice that surrounds his heart.

Hannibal is impressed. A bold move on the dear doctor's part to prompt an emotional response from him with tactile association and so soon. A gentle poke, elegantly expressed but defiant just like the ancient Florentines refusing salt for their bread. Hannibal thinks Clayton not as nervous as he appears. Well, he is nervous, but not so unhinged that he cannot think or plan ahead. Or, spar with him. Pleased that Clayton will provide him with the kind of exchange he was hoping for, he turns his attention back to the label on the bottle.

"Cold pressed virgin olive oil, produced right here in Florence. Subtle flavors, a humble unassuming breakfast. Very much like you, I think."

The dark eyes hold his and Daniel lets slip a twitch of a smile. Hannibal is so very charming even while swimming around him like a shark.

"Well, it has been paired with a dark Italian roast coffee I've had the pleasure to taste." Daniel counters, "Smoky, rich, and velvety smooth. I take mine with a little cream and sugar. How do you take yours?" Daniel raises a brow.

"Fresh out of the pot, savagely hot." Hannibal smiles, "Sometimes with a little sugar."

"Too hot to drink like that." Daniel says.

"I don't mind blowing on it." Hannibal returns. He takes the lid off the tall cup of coffee and inhales its aroma. He takes a sip eyes on Clayton the entire time. "Tastes good. I think I'll drink it as is."

"I'm going to get some sugar and creamer." Daniel says, pleased and relieved he survived the first volley of Hannibal's opium tipped arrows. The relief is short lived.

Hannibal waits until Clayton has passed behind him before he speaks. "I had dinner with Will last night."

He listens as the scraping of shoes across the Berber carpet halts. A moment passes, a pregnant pause, uncomfortable for its duration not its silence.

"How was it?" Daniel says mildly.

"Almost like old times but of course it wasn't. He didn't finish dessert, but he seemed to enjoy the rest of the meal."

“Cleaned his plate?”

Daniel’s fingers curl into a fist as he stands motionless behind Hannibal. Hannibal would not lie to him about this. Telling the truth is far more devastating and Hannibal knows it.

“Sopped up the sauce with his bread. Voracious appetite. I think he missed my cooking.”

Daniel walks to the mini-fridge and grabs a few packs of sugar from the wicker basket on top and takes the liquid non-dairy creamer out. He takes a moment to regroup, stirring in the sugar, then creamer slowly until his hands stop shaking.

Daniel feels sick.

Hannibal just threw him a curve ball and he had been unable to even take a swing at it. But you aren’t supposed to take a swing at a curve ball. He takes a gulp of coffee as he looks about the room. The large paper bag on the couch must contain the supposed thank-you present. Hannibal seems in no hurry to give it to him.

He calmly takes his seat adjacent to Hannibal on one of the couches same as before. They are, in fact sitting exactly where they sat before when one was doctor and one pretended to be patient. Hannibal has already moved a paper plate and utensils there. Daniel decides rather than take the bait over Hannibal’s dinner with Will to use it, cast a net of his own and see what happens.

There is not a lot that happens around Hannibal that he doesn’t already expect. To keep him guessing keeps him amused.

“I suppose the island of Sardinia provided the inspiration for the menu?”

“It did. How does that make you feel?”

“I’m not fond of Sardinian cuisine, but if Will enjoyed it, then…as his therapist I am pleased he has made the unconscious conscious.

“You’ve indulged in my cooking yourself.”

“I’m aware of that. I have also made the unconscious conscious.

“Learned some things about yourself, did you?”

“It is the unfortunate therapist who does not learn something about himself while engaged with his patient. I think Will and I have learned a lot from each other.”

“If I may, what is the goal of your therapy with Will?”

“Ironically, the same as yours.”

“I imagine you and Will have discussed my therapy in some detail in order to draw that conclusion. Making the unconscious conscious is a Freudian prayer from a dead religion. I doubt you limited your therapy to the psychoanalytical. How would you characterize your approach to therapy with him?”

Hannibal lifts his plastic fork and gestures to the humble feast before them. Daniel nods for Hannibal to go ahead.

Daniel watches Hannibal select pieces of the fresh fruit, aged cheese and cured meat from the containers to place them meticulously on his plate. He waits until he has finished taking what he wants before sticking his own fork into the containers.

“If Will were a ship on the ocean, adrift and seeking a course, then I would be the ballast and sometimes the anchor if he ran into a storm.”

“Storms occur frequently in Will’s ocean. Easy to become lost. You have never been his compass?” Hannibal says, tearing off a chunk of the Tuscan bread.

“Will charts his own course. He’s an able navigator. He understands that I cannot be both anchor and compass.”

“He trusts you to leave the destination to him.”

“When he decides what that destination is, but yes, the destination is entirely up to him.”

Hannibal sets down his fork, and gathers up the extra plastic fork, knife, and spoon left in the bottom of the bag in his hand. He holds them out to Daniel. Daniel takes them from his hand, and again that electric sizzle ignites along his skin.

“If you were to reduce the relationship between Will, me, and you to those utensils, how would you arrange them?”

The air in the room becomes denser still and Daniel feels like he is moving through that cloud of ether, saturated in sensation, unable to differentiate between fear and attraction. He reflects for a moment and then decides on the geometrical representation he thinks best illustrates his mindset fully aware of the psychological schools of thought being applied here.

Hannibal watches Clayton place each of the utensils on the table in descending order, three parallel lines. Knife on top, then fork, and spoon on the bottom. He thinks their exchange promising so far, and being with Clayton is so very much like being with Will. Hannibal meets the glittering green gaze as Clayton lifts his head from the table.

“Interesting. And who is who?”

“You would be the knife, Will the fork, and me the spoon.” Daniel says leaning back in the couch while Hannibal slips a slice of salami into his mouth. “Try not to read too much into it.”

“Impossible not to read too much. I can understand why I am the knife. Why are you the spoon and not the fork?”

“Well, when you set the table, the knife is alongside the spoon, but rarely does one actually use the knife with the spoon. Except if there is no fork.”

Clayton is absolutely delightful this morning, Hannibal thinks. Even under duress, his dry sense of humor manages to surface. Will’s protectiveness of this green eyed jewel becomes more apparent all the time.

“You see relationships between individuals, traveling along the same course, but they remain distinct and apart. Only the fork sits in a position of affinity with the other two.”

Daniel nods, “How do you see us?”

Hannibal does not hesitate to place the utensils in form of a triangle. He looks up into Daniel's expectant face, his brows raised and lips pressed into a puzzled pucker as he traces a finger around the grouping.

"You see a potential trinity of madness? I don't think so." Daniel moves the spoon away from the knife, breaking the triangle. "You want me to see a triptych upon your alter of exclusion that will never be. I saw Luciano's tableau. I was with Will when he created it. Will spoke with geometry too." Daniel, says thinking of the elliptical arcs of flesh within Will's cubist tableau of blood, breath, and glass. He removes the spoon from the table, tosses it back in the bag. "There is only a diptych on your alter and that is all there ever will be."

"Do you think Will has not considered extending to you an invitation? I suspect he already has."

Daniel sits unmoving, the sense of the surreal overpowering as he listens to his heart hammering in his chest. The same prideful possessiveness Daniel had felt from Will while had he been hallucinating, wrestling with him on their bed, emanates from Hannibal, it curls in Daniel's limbs and the thought occurs that Hannibal believes he too is yet another thing he can take from Will and make his own.

He knows the devil conceals the most convincing lies within the canvas of candor that greets Daniel's eyes. Hannibal is fishing with alluring bait, confusing what if with what actually is and hoping Daniel cannot or does not want to recognize the difference.

"If Will has extended that invitation, then I must have missed it."

"You've tasted forbidden fruit haven't you and it's not as bitter as you imagined. In fact, I know how flavorful the fruit of that particular tree can be." Hannibal says drawing a slippery piece of peach into his mouth.

Those breadcrumbs are tasty though aren't they? You helped yourself to a few last night.

So did you. Ate more than crumbs. Not…tasty enough?

Very…tasty. But the other crumbs get tastier all the time, don't they? I know how…seductive that taste is.

Those are your feelings, Will, not mine.

Daniel wonders if that is really true. His feelings are so mixed up with Will's he can't tell if what he feels here with Hannibal are his own emotions or reflections of Will. He had told Will to find the good in Hannibal and he decides to lay down his shield for him as he had done for Will so he can embrace the madness, hold it close, and see if Hannibal can discern truth when he hears it from lips unused to telling lies. Will and Hannibal are so used to dealing deceit to each other, an honest conversation is likely impossible. Daniel thinks Hannibal has forgotten how to be honest, if he ever was. He will have to engage in a little quid pro quo with Hannibal to establish a framework. Daniel realizes he doesn't have to. He already has a framework with Victor Boucher.

Daniel plucks at the cheese and salami on his plate, pushes the fruit around, and sips more coffee. His stomach grumbles, but he has no appetite. Adrenaline and nausea assault his body with a ferocity Daniel has not felt since his last hangover. From his evening with Dumont, rather Du Maurier. Daniel wants to ask Hannibal about her, but he's not sure how to broach the topic. He thinks he'll just stick to plan A. If he is going to determine whether or not Hannibal is speaking truth at any given moment, he has to keep his wits about him. Hannibal's emotions are not enough.

Hannibal has finished his breakfast and stands by his bookcase holding his cup of black coffee. He lifts a plate from its brass bracket and scrutinizes the red figures upon it.

"I was admiring your collection of Greek reproductions earlier. I collect Greek pottery myself, though it has been some time since I last visited Athens or any of the islands."

"I could not get enough of Greece. Such a beautiful place. I feel like I barely had the time to explore."

"You have an appreciation of the art and culture. It's history. It's…literary legacy."

"I am an armchair archaeologist." Daniel says, wistful smile playing about his lips. He finds it easy to smile around Hannibal despite the belly full of nails. His odd mannerisms and unique cadence of speech have an old world grace that is difficult to resist. At the moment, he doesn't feel dangerous.

"And of course, there is the surviving literature. I was a lit major before taking up psychiatry and medicine."

"I'm not at all surprised. Art is a hobby of mine. Collecting and drawing. I've attempted to draw many scenes from the *Iliad* myself. Will might have told you."

Hannibal speaks with a false modesty that Daniel chooses to ignore. "Will mentioned that, yes."

"I've yet to draw a scene with the doomed Hector. Of course, nearly everyone is doomed in Homer's *Iliad.* Such poignant prose comes from the tragedy." Hannibal turns to set the plate back in its place, the scene of battle between Achilles and Hector in plain view.

"Hector, my son," Hannibal quotes, turning back around to face Daniel. "Stay not to face this man alone or you will meet death at his hands, for he is mightier than you."

"Monster that he is would indeed that the gods loved him no better than I do." Daniel responds, eyes brazenly locked with Hannibal's. "Priam had already lost sons to the Greeks, he had only Hector and Paris left."

"He wanted no more sacrifices. " Hannibal says, his face tight so it doesn't betray his amusement at Clayton's cold stare. "He knew Achilles was favored by the gods. More so than Hector."

He is charmed by Clayton's impudence and finding him so like Will this morning that he doesn't want their little breakfast to end. But the dreary cloud of the FBI hovers close by and Hannibal cannot expose Clayton's association with him. Besides, he has to deliver Will's things to him at the hospital. Will has to have his phone back in his hands before Pazzi, the Paolini, or Mason make their move.

Daniel tears his gaze from Hannibal and his bookcase to fix upon the remains of their breakfast. He is well aware of the relationship between Hector, Achilles, and Patroclus and the analogy Hannibal is hinting at. He also knows Hannibal would write his own *Iliad* and wonders if the fates of Achilles and Patroclus are the only ones he would rewrite.

"Hector was brave. A worthy adversary." Daniel says.

“But he took Patroclus away from Achilles.”

“If Hector had not killed Patroclus, Achilles would not have fought.”

“If Patroclus had not taken up Achilles' armor, he would not have died at Hector’s hands.”

“You are saying Patroclus set all that happens in motion?”

“His actions prompted all that came after.”

“And Achilles’ rage and refusal to fight had nothing at all to do with it.”

“Not directly. What Patroclus does determines the fate of all three of them.”

Daniel cannot argue with Hannibal’s interpretation. His interpretation was not offered for the purpose of literary analysis. He is using metaphor and embedded meaning to convey his intentions. If Daniel is reading him correctly, Daniel’s fate lies with Will. Daniel would feel confident about that except that the words were delivered by Hannibal.

Daniel looks again at the bag still setting on the couch closest to the door. He wonders if Hannibal is waiting for him to ask about it, or if he should let Hannibal present it when he wants. Of course, even if Daniel asks about it, there is no guarantee Hannibal will tell him.

“I am familiar with the game you two play. Played it myself with Will. A learned habit and hard to break him of.” Daniel says, plunging into the pool of madness.

“Which game? There are so many.” Hannibal says from his perch on the edge of his seat, erect and animated.

“I think you call this one sins of omission, couching conversation in carefully constructed structures too frail to withstand scrutiny closer than breath upon a house made of cards.”

“Metaphors and ideals are useful. Sounds like you play this game often. You played quite well just now.”

“We play all the time. Except on those occasions when we don’t.”

“And you would prefer not to play with me.”

“I would prefer not. You create a framework to avoid outright lies, but you deceive each other, nonetheless.”

“And why would we do that?”

“So you can delude yourselves and each other by carefully phrasing questions you don’t really want the answers to. Outright lies leave no doubt as to blame. But, sins of omission perpetuate the game.”

“Sins of omission allow conversation to flow without saying things better left unsaid.”

“Better for whom? I’ll bet there is no trunk large enough to contain all the things left unsaid by you.”

“Will’s trunk would be just as spacious. Perhaps that unspoken invitation is in there.”

“Maybe it is. But if he really wants an answer he knows to ask outright, not stick it in a bottle and float it toward me upon his ocean.”

“Will plays games, too.”

“And I wonder where he learned to play so well?”

“You have also learned to play, from him. Usually, the pieces on the board never learn to play.”

“I suspect the pieces on the board are unaware they are pieces.”

“Which piece are you?”

“It’s not my game. But I accept that I entered it freely.”

“Will gave you opportunity to walk away, but you didn’t. Why do you stay?”

“Why do you?”

“Have you ever heard of the philosopher’s stone?”

Daniel has to think a moment. Hannibal’s penchant for shifting gears seems random but Daniel knows better. Compliments aside, Daniel knows he is but a novice at this game and he scuttles the fear, lets it sink deep down to a place where he can ignore it, though he knows it will come up for air at some point.

“Are you referring to that legendary ingredient that turns metal to stone? The elixir of life, it’s called.”

“The alchemy of transmutation, yes. But I’m referring to the alchemy of the mind. Aristotle refers to a concept of an invisible primal material, a sort of embodiment of potential that waits to be given form.”

“Aristotle was referring to what we recognize as the soul. Created in the womb, it is all that’s left of us when we die. It’s the spirit that supposed to fly to heaven or sink into hell.”

“Jung said that his discovery of alchemy helped him understand that the unconscious is actually a process. One’s ego, or conscious self is continually mediating with the unconscious. But it is only when we are aware of that rapport can a metamorphosis of the psyche occur.”

“You are describing Jung’s collective unconsciousness. Your particular brand of psychiatry would tend toward activating the unconscious, creating an inner dialogue with our innate dispositions.”

“Very perceptive. A psychological alchemy that results from the destruction of ego in order to release the true self within, a process of transforming the spirit that mirrors the process of transforming metal.”

“Alchemy was viewed as the worst kind of fraud. Con-artists received a special place in the Eighth Circle of Dante’s *Inferno*. The psychiatric equivalent would be psychic driving.”

“Yes, it would. The philosopher’s stone would refer to Jung’s archetype of self. The whole being, the unity of the conscious with the unconscious.”

“That’s what you tried to achieve with Will?”

“All of our conversations were about him realizing who he was.”

“Will insisted you wanted him to realize who you thought he was. Who you wanted him to be.”

“And what does Will think now? Now that he’s been in therapy with you?”

“Why haven’t you asked him yourself?”

Hannibal takes the towel from table, folds it once, twice and lays it back down, his face like stone. “Will’s sins of omission often speak louder than his words.” Hannibal says softly.

And Daniel feels his wound opened and raw deep inside. Like a puncture to his own heart. Just as quickly, Daniel feels that block of ice returning, as Hannibal buries his pain, heaps cold upon his heart like dirt cast upon a grave.

“Only if you’re listening.” Daniel says, his voice neutral. “Perhaps you weren’t listening. Perhaps, in trying to think like Will, who is always trying to think like you, what you really hear is yourself. You are, each of you, so like the other.”

Daniel picks up the towel from the table, holds it in his hands hesitant, but decides to finish his thought. “It would be an easy enough mistake to make, wouldn’t it?”

Hannibal looks into Clayton’s face and sees no judgment there though he expected it. Clayton is suggesting transference in his gentle way. He thinks again of his conversation with Will about Lounds the night after Alana had left them standing by the window in the salon.

She is a problem we could solve together.

If we agreed on the solution. We don’t. Impulses follow instinct. My instinct tells me to wait.

Will had been anticipating Hannibal’s actions. Had wanted to extend the game with Jack and Hannibal. So he could think while he tossed about his ocean, unable to grasp Hannibal’s paddle because he no longer had reason to trust it. He could not even trust himself.

Everything Clayton has said confirms what Hannibal has been musing upon for what seems an eternity.

Hannibal looks into Clayton’s face and sees for a moment Will’s same naked need to be understood and he is reminded of those first sessions with Will in his office. He thinks of the face he saw behind all those early morning cups of coffee in his breakfast nook, before Will had learned how to lie to him. Clayton has made his point. He and Will have learned how to lie to each other incredibly well.

Clayton makes him long for those early days with Will. He wants them back and knows he cannot have them. He has shattered that tea cup and must deal with what is left. His conversation with Clayton this morning has served to remind him of this reality, and he is quick to remind himself that none of this is Clayton’s fault. He cannot help the feelings he arouses within. He is still both wound and balm.

Hannibal has also noticed that Clayton has become increasingly more confident as they have talked, almost as though he has somehow syphoned Hannibal's essence like stolen gasoline. He has quickly assimilated and employed the same cadence and rhythm Hannibal shares with Will.

"The reason Will often retreats, seems withdrawn, emotionally wounded is because he is imagining what the people around him feel. He does this compulsively." Hannibal says.

"Yes. His face often conveys involuntary expressions of his imagination. Will is projecting; not emoting. I know.

"You do the same thing." Hannibal says quietly. When several seconds slip without an answer, Hannibal continues, "You seem better able to control it, but you and Will have a similar gift."

Daniel clears his throat, shoves his hands in his pockets. He can commit sins of omission too.

"Truth begets truth. Lies beget lies." Daniel says after a long pause. "If honest is what you want, then honesty is what you have to offer. One of you has to stop playing."

Hannibal considers Clayton's words for a moment. The young doctor has given him food for thought.   He glances at his watch. "I know the other psychiatrist will be coming in soon. You must be eager to get to the hospital, though I suspect you will be waiting there a while."

"He can get out of those chains, right?"

"I left him the means to get out of the chains. Otherwise, Jack Crawford will deal with the problem with his usual heavy handiness."

Hannibal watches Clayton run his fingers through untamed curls, windblown wisps around his face from driving with all the windows open. He bites his bottom lip and glances at the computer, his expression pinched, deep in thought. Claytons stands unbearably close. He has kept his distance, always out of arms reach, but not at the moment. Hannibal eases around the table.

"Something on your mind?" Hannibal prompts.

"Lots of things on my mind. Ruggerio…"

"You want to know if Will killed him."

"Did he?"

"That you have to ask suggests to me that you have no illusions about the effectiveness of your therapy."

"Meaning I have either embraced my success or accepted my failure."

"Which is it?"

"Did Will kill him?"

"When you look at Will what do you see?" Hannibal says.

Daniel looks aside not bothering to conceal his exasperation. "I see a profound weariness for this world. What do you see?"

“I agree. He seeks another.”

“And you are wondering if he sees you in it.”

“You are wondering the same thing.”

“He is not choosing between you and I. He is choosing between redemption and acceptance.”

Daniel is disclosing a confidence to Hannibal he knows he shouldn’t, but if Hannibal is as perceptive as Daniel thinks he is, he’s not telling him anything he doesn’t already know. And, if Will gets himself caught up in Verger’s trap, it will be Hannibal, not Jack Crawford, who saves him. Or, he will be in a position to save him.

Daniel knows it is not in him to let Will commit suicide no matter what he calls it.

“I am aware of our dear Will’s dilemma. You helped him to see more clearly. Showed him a way out of those dark places.” Hannibal is saying.

“Both of you are in very dark places, but not the same place or the same darkness. I see Will’s inferno more clearly. I see its architect very clearly.”

“Do you? You see me through Will’s eyes.”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“Enough to remain in his inferno with him. You have an understanding of each of us, and each of us has an understanding of you. Will has invited you into our universe and you accepted…at least as his therapist.”

“Do I hear an invitation coming from you?”

“Would you like an invitation?”

“An invitation…to what?”

“Well, you’ve already tasted the fruit…” Hannibal says, lifting his hand suddenly to take silky brown locks and curl them around his fingers.

Clayton does not move, too stunned to protest as Hannibal’s hand finds its way around behind his ear to cradle the head and luxuriate in the soft curls that feel so much like Will’s Hannibal can’t help but to revel in sensation he has but barely indulged. The green eyes staring into his are wide with wonderment and confusion, but the lips part and Hannibal feels the warm breath expelled from the beautiful mouth upon his own. *Just a taste…*

Daniel is overwhelmed suddenly by the scent of sandalwood, spiced leather, and coffee. Emotions become jumbled, fused and he stands paralyzed, unsure that his feet even touch the floor. And the heat sizzles from head to toes as Hannibal stands so close to him. He knows instinctively Hannibal touches Will the same way. Will has pulled him close just like this. He has felt Will’s reactions to him when he has touched his face and head in a similar fashion. He feels Hannibal’s hands grip his hips next, pull him close so that belt buckles nearly collide. He stares up into dark luminous eyes and he knows he shouldn’t want it, but he does.

The mouth is warm and moist when Hannibal covers his lips, the jaw moves forcefully against his own and Daniel clenches his hands at his sides not knowing what else to do with them. His lips part wide, damnably willing to accommodate the ravenous predator at his throat. His hands come up to cradle elbows to guide them up so Hannibal can cradle his face instead. He senses the longing, the want, and the need. He is playing surrogate yet again, but the yearning from Hannibal is genuine. It is intense. It is heartbreakingly beautiful.

This…is what Will does to him.

Hannibal feels the heat of Clayton's embrace, feels the tongue finally engage, stabbing him back, his mouth becomes pliant against Hannibal's feverish assault. His sweat is spiced with fear, but tasting of the musky sweetness from sheets he shares with Will. Clayton smells of his house, his dogs, of Will and the scent is maddening as Hannibal grinds him down onto the arm of the chair, hardly aware that he is doing so until Daniel cries out, his legs twisting uncomfortably beneath him.

Hannibal stands up abruptly and wipes his mouth. He stares at Clayton as his body begins to compose itself, his mind reeling with the realization of what he has done, what he has exposed to Clayton.

Daniel slides from the arm of the chair to return unsteadily to his feet. He looks down at his shoes, flushed and embarrassed by the throbbing between his legs. He senses the same in Hannibal and dares not look up to clarify. He doesn't need to. He gives Hannibal a moment to adjust, to paint his face with the cool veneer of his person suit, the mad fever of a moment ago tucked away.

When he looks up, Hannibal is staring at the ocean print on his wall next to the bookcase, his expression thoughtful though his cheeks remain ruddy, the blush of his passions still ripe upon them. He clears his throat and Daniel almost smiles, but does not.

“I think it was Jung who said your visions will become clear only when you look into your own heart.” Hannibal says, head in profile, his features smooth as polished stone.

“He also said, who looks outside, dreams and who looks inside, awakes.”

Hannibal looks over at Clayton, and Clayton lowers his eyes immediately, involuntarily and Hannibal watches him silently berate himself for his awkwardness. Hannibal likes this unpretentious doctor, this little brown mouse. He thinks of him lying still on Du Maurier's couch, body limp as Hannibal had held his face in his able hands, tube down his throat so he could breathe. Fate perhaps that Clayton shared with him this intimate moment just now.

“Du Maurier wasted an opportunity with you.” Hannibal says, “You are aware she drugged you?”

“I am. What do you know about it? Did she tell you?”

“You should know that she almost killed you. You reacted badly. Stopped breathing. Anaphylactic shock.”

“You…you were there?”

“Thankfully. Saved your life and put you to bed. I tell you this because…”

“Because the devil is not as black as he is painted?” Daniel says, his mind still mired in a moment ago, body still recovering from turbulent tremors that refuse to subside.

Hannibal raises a brow thinking what a curious thing for Clayton to say. Before he can inquire further, the phone on Clayton's desk buzzes loudly.

"That's the intercom." Daniel says, crossing the room, a fluttering of alarm to accompany his flustered mind. He presses the button on the phone to answer.

"Doctor Clayton?" The voice crackles over the system in need of an upgrade.

"Yeah…what is it, Maria."

"Is Maria your receptionist? There's no one here." Comes the voice, clearly American.

Daniel looks up at Hannibal who is as surprised as he is. Hannibal is almost certain he knows who is downstairs, but he waits to hear her speak again.

"Well, who am I speaking with?"

"This is a little awkward but I was hoping I could speak to you about one of your patients."

Hannibal recognizes the voice right away. The loathsome Lounds must have been chased from the crime scene. Interesting that she came here. Clayton is not even supposed to be here. Her information is scant or she is snooping. The doomed Agamemnon must have slipped sensitive information to the tabloid blogger. Hannibal thinks he will be committing neither murder nor mercy but providing a public service.

Daniel glances at Hannibal and shrugs as he speaks. "I don't discuss my patients. With anyone. Who are you?"

"I think you'll talk to me. My name is Freddie Lounds. And you are Will Graham's newest psychiatrist and…"

"I'm on my way down." Daniel says. He clicks off the intercom. He turns to Hannibal who is grabbing the paper bag from the couch.

"Will left these belongings at my house. He needs them back. If you would be so kind…take them with you to the hospital?"

Daniel takes the bag from his hands. "What about Lounds?"

"Leave Miss Lounds to me."

Daniel cannot believe this. The rabbit hole is bottomless he thinks. He shakes his head from side to side. "Not…here."

"What time does this Doctor Lorenzo come in?" Hannibal says calmly looking around the room.

"No patients until nine thirty but she will be in before that."

"It's almost eight thirty now. I don't need much time. Where is Maria?"

"I'll find out when I go downstairs. She wouldn't have interrupted us but she always leaves a note."

“Send Lounds upstairs. Inform me by intercom she is on the way up and when Maria will return. Go on to the hospital.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I promise not to leave a mess. Go on. Tick Tock.”

Daniel checks his pockets for his car keys. He cannot think. He has to leave. He clutches the paper bag in his hands and walks out the door, shutting it behind him. He shudders on the other side of the door. Takes several deep breaths and descends the stairs.

The head full of bright orange ringlets appears half way down the steps. It hovers over the receptionist’s desk, hands flipping through Constanzia’s rolodex like it is her own. She wears a dark green shirt that seems off season until Daniel realizes she wore it for camouflage. She came here straight from the crime scene. The sight of her rifling through the desk pricks a nerve and Daniel calls out from the stairs.

“Ms. Lounds. Step out from behind the desk and tell me why I shouldn’t toss you outa here on your ass.”

Lounds turns around and her large blue eyes pop with delight as her mouth drops into a slow liquid smile. Her eyes skim over Daniel, up and down, a shameless and provocative appraisal.

“You look just like him. I’ve been looking at you coming and going from FBI headquarters haven’t I? While the real Will Graham has been courting Hannibal Lecter. Jack Crawford has lost his mind.”

“Will is helping the FBI find and catch Lecter. And I am helping Will.”

“I’ll bet you are.”

Lounds smacks her lips and continues to shake her head slightly as she looks at him. Daniel is unperturbed by the attention. He can use it.

“I suppose you are aware of the murder this morning?”

“And your blog. How many pictures did you snap off before they snagged you?” Daniel says, searching the desk for any note from Maria that might now be stuck under something else thanks to Lounds.

“Plenty. I’ll be writing about you and Graham. Smile.”

Daniel blinks furiously as a flashbulb goes off. When he can finally see again, Lounds is standing in front of him with a pocket instamatic she must have bought at a pharmacy on the way.

“You can contribute or you can read about it later. Your call.”

Daniel looks upstairs, feigning concern. Well, not the concern he wants to convey to Lounds. He tells himself Hannibal would go after her anyway, but he knows a part of him, wants Hannibal to… Daniel’s breath catches in his throat. He swallows down the panic attack and remembers he has more valium in the car.

Just do what he said…. He finds the note Maria left, reads it, and turns back to Lounds.

“I don’t care what you write. I have nothing to say. I can’t talk to you about Will. Confidentiality.” He glances upstairs again.

“What are you doing here, anyway?”

“What do you mean? This is my office.”

“I was under the impression that you were helping the FBI, which means you shouldn’t be here… you should be at the hospital, for Graham.”

“That is the plan.”

“But he didn’t go to the hospital did he? He’s upstairs.”

“There is a patient upstairs, but you can’t go up there.”

Lounds breaks to a run up the steps, phone in hand in case Graham threatens her again.

Daniel hits the intercom, “Miss Lounds is on her way up. Maria comes back from the post office at eight forty five.”

Daniel hesitates a second and then walks briskly out the back door. He cannot get his keys out of his pocket quickly enough. He turns on the ignition and backs out of his parking space, hands already in the glove compartment searching for the little brown prescription container of valium.

Lounds reaches the top step and grasps the doorknob, shakes her head and wets her lush red lips. She flings the door open and her stomach drops, her mouth goes dry.

“He said…he had a patient…” Lounds stutters, her hands grasping at her phone, trembling fingers hitting what she hopes to God are 911.

“I am his patient.” Hannibal says, rising from behind the desk to greet her, “Couples therapy.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 74
http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/203/berlinde-de-bruyckere-luca-giordano-we-are-all-flesh/view/
For more information on the Giordano/Bruyckere exhibit in London, We Are All Flesh
Hannibal and Daniel quote from Homer’s Iliad, Book XXII
For intro information on Carl Jung, Alchemy, and Unconscious Archetypes
http://www.carl-jung.net/collective_unconscious.html
https://taicarmen.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/alchemy-an-allegorical-map-to-consciousness-transmutation/
http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Form_and_Matter#Aristotle

Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

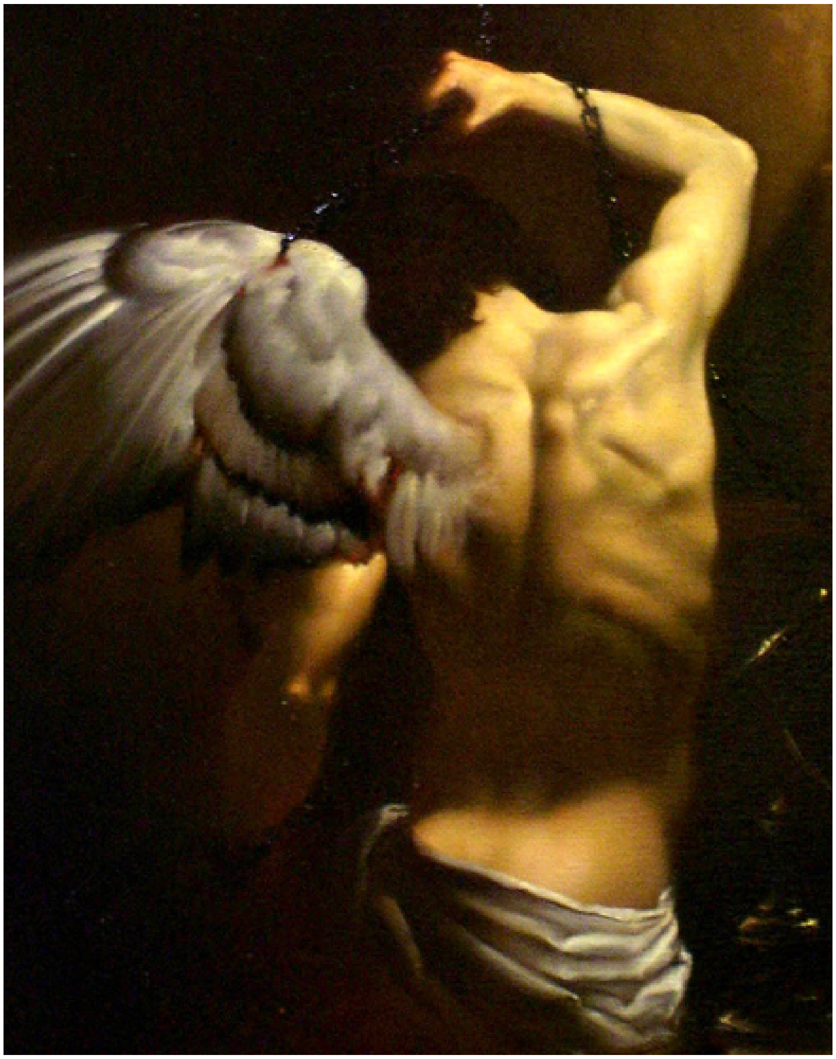
> Hannibal considers the future of Tattle Crime. Daniel meets up with Will at Ospidali di Careggi. Jack drops by. Bedelia has accepted that she can’t turn on the television without a bottle of wine.
>
> “Yes. Couples’ therapy. You…interrupted my session.” Hannibal says.
>
> “Couples’ therapy requires both partners…to be present.”
>
> Lounds continues to look up from the Berber carpet, Lecter’s reproachful tone alerting her of another possibility. She realizes she has assumed too much. Lecter was sitting at Clayton’s desk, not in one of the couches. To which couple is he referring? Who was playing therapist?
>
> “Will couldn’t make it this morning.” Hannibal says crisply, “As you well know. Your phone, please.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 75

Hannibal considers the future of Tattle Crime. Daniel meets up with Will at Ospidali di Careggi. Jack drops by. Bedelia has accepted that she can’t turn on the television without a bottle of wine.



Angelo Prigioni, Roberto Ferri

When you have driven them from the ships, come back to me. Even if Hera's lord, the Thunderer, grants you glory, don't press on against the battle-loving Trojans on your own: that will only lessen my chance of honours. In the heat of victory, as you lay about the Trojans in this fight, don't make for Ilium, lest a god from Olympus comes to join the fray, for Apollo, the Far-Striker, loves them greatly. Return to me, when you have lit your light of deliverance among the ships, leave the rest to drive the enemy over the plain. By Father Zeus, Athene and Apollo, I wish the Trojans death to a man and the Argives likewise, and that we two might survive the ruin, to pry loose Troy's holy diadem.'

Iliad, Book XVI, Achilles warns Patroclus against pursuing the Trojans without him.

Lounds' jaw grinds to a halt mid-thought the absurdity of bursting into Clayton's office to find Hannibal Lecter sitting behind his desk so implausible that fear is trumped for the moment. When it surfaces the chill along her spine causes every hair on her body to prickle. She should be running for her life back down the stairs except that her feet refuse to move. Did she hear Lecter correctly just now? She thinks Lecter can't be serious, but images of Graham in the crime tableau alive and displayed like some medieval boy toy scream otherwise.

"Couples' therapy…" she repeats dully.

The implications of Lecter's simple confession detonate like tiny bombs across the fevered landscape of Lounds' mind.

Did Hannibal Lecter just confirm everything I've ever written about him and Graham?

Random thoughts fall like puzzle pieces from the ceiling of her skull as her feet remain rooted to the carpet, her mind a train still pulling into the station. Obviously there is much more to the tableau Lecter left this morning than Graham would lead the FBI and Polizia to believe. The aging but suave Pazzi had thrown her a bone giving her the name of Graham's new shrink and Lounds had smiled indulgently, had allowed her gaze to linger on his creased face and diamond earring and had pressed him about his trip to Impruneta with Graham. A trip Pazzi had been eager to divulge, focusing mainly on his brilliant surveillance of Graham.

There is no love lost between Pazzi and Graham. If Graham had not been staked to the ground, Lounds thinks he might have torn Pazzi apart. He clearly blamed Pazzi for Detective Ruggerio's demise or wanted everyone to believe that was the case. And Pazzi blames Graham, had stopped just short of accusing Graham in his diatribe to her at the Gardens. Graham's smoldering stare had followed Pazzi wherever he walked, conversation between them reduced to a sort of articulate snarling signaling to Lounds that a confrontation is broiling and Pazzi may yet find himself the main course of a romantic dinner.

She just can't figure out all the angles. And her readers want those angles. She has provoked and prodded her readers with questions all week, and the week before and the natives grow restless. The hits on her site have dropped recently and she feels the pressure of expectation like a weight upon her narrow shoulders as news coverage breaks of the tragic tableau this morning.

Pazzi seems to be the only one with his head out of his ass, the only one immune to the sad glistening eyes of Crawford's broken and brooding profiler to see what is really going on. Lounds may be opportunistic and crass, unable to recognize the subtlety and sophistication of Lecter's design but she recognizes a pair of killers and a sadomasochistic relationship when she sees it and she called this one a long time ago. Graham apparently forgot his safe word last night and Lecter got carried away. She wants to know if they killed Ruggerio before or after… Her mind grasps at mad thoughts that spill like a cascade of straws as her phone falls from feeble fingers to the floor.

She stoops to pick it up and as her life line finds its way into her quavering hand, a pair of stylish leather loafers steps into view. She looks up to see Hannibal Lecter standing over her, hand outstretched.

"Yes. Couples' therapy. You…interrupted my session." Hannibal says.

"Couples' therapy requires both partners…to be present."

Lounds continues to look up from the Berber carpet, Lecter's reproachful tone alerting her of another possibility. She realizes she has assumed too much. Lecter was sitting at Clayton's desk, not in one of the couches. To which couple is he referring? Who was playing therapist?

"Will couldn't make it this morning." Hannibal says crisply, "As you well know. Your phone, please."

Lounds offers it without hesitation swallowing the lump in her throat. The hand that grasps her phone moves quick and sure and he barely glances at her. There is nothing threatening in his movements but he exudes a malevolence that sets her most primal instincts to jittering and her legs feel jelly soft. She is no lamb in the slaughter house and she is not deceived by Lecter's human facade. Flashes of standing again in Lecter's office on a late afternoon in Baltimore mirror the moment. After calling her out for her deception, he had patted the cushion of the elegant settee with the same tranquil confidence as he had offered his hand just now. Again, he manages to cause a flush of warmth to sting her cheeks and she feels the child about to be scolded.

How did you know when Will Graham would be here?

I may have also recorded your session with Will Graham.

You didn't answer the question. How did you know?

I can't answer that question.

Come. Sit by me. Delete the conversations you recorded. Doctor patient confidentiality works both ways. Delete it, please…

She reminds herself Lecter made the remark about his therapy with Clayton for a reason. His apparent openness is neither completely accurate nor completely without a snare. Or a cord of rope. Or a butcher knife… He knows Lounds is about to jump out of her skin as she kneels upon the carpet, stomach in knots.

Doctor Clayton is apparently involved with both Lecter and Graham up to his neck. He had played her downstairs and Lounds hopes it was because he knew Lecter had no intention of hurting her. This is his practice, his office. He would not want a crime scene here. If Lecter wants his *therapy* to continue he wouldn't want to make a crime scene here either.

Clayton is trying to keep his association with Graham quiet. As she stares up at Lecter's disarmingly handsome face she thinks there would appear to be quite a few things Doctor Clayton wants to keep quiet.

She simply has to get an interview with Clayton. If he survives. If she…

His receptionist, Maria, whoever she is, should be back soon Lounds reminds herself. She heard Clayton say so when he called upstairs to warn his *patient* she was on the way up. Lecter does not have much time to kill her. Lounds smells opportunity. The scent is faint, but it is there hanging around Lecter like a cloud as he examines her phone.

"It appears you dialed the wrong number. Finger must have slipped off the nine. Haste makes waste."

"I don't have Jack Crawford's number this time."

"Nor his sympathy, I suspect."

Hannibal clicks off the cheap flip phone. Jack Crawford must have relieved her of all her usual tools of the trade. "You've been very naughty this morning, Miss Lounds. What is to be done about that?"

"You told Clayton to send me up to you. He's downstairs guarding the door?"

"No. We are alone. He has to meet Will at the hospital. I promised him I wouldn't leave a mess. Shall we?"

Hannibal suppresses a smile as he thinks of Clayton. Clayton is likely reexamining his actions as he drives to the hospital in a blur of emotional turmoil. Clayton just became very intimate with his instincts and Hannibal wonders if he'll share his tasty revelations with Will. Hector has just faced Achilles alone and on gliding wings takes up his mask to bring Patroclus his armor. Will might be disappointed when he learns Lounds isn't dead. The irony.

Hannibal extends his hand to the slim and delicate pig crouched on the carpet. The coppery spirals hang in her face and Hannibal can smell the fear floating on her sweat along with cigarettes, the scent of foliage, and her own signature blend of patchouli that brings bitter memories bubbling up from a wound still sore. Lounds does not smoke. If the scent of cigarette smoke suffused in the carrot colored curls and cotton fiber of her clothes is from her contact at the crime scene, Hannibal deduces she talked to Policia and not FBI. None of Crawford's people smoke that he is aware of. The Italians smoke constantly, almost as much as the French and one of the Policia in particular smokes constantly.

Beneath the overpowering patchouli wafts the scent of the same designer fragrance he had smelled when he relieved Will of his clothes yesterday. Pazzi's distinct odor, a heavy woodsy bergamot dampened with menthol cigarettes had permeated the folds of Will's jacket and trousers and had been absorbed into his hair.

Lounds stares at the hand in front of her eyes and does not move. "Why should I trust you?"

Terrified but stubborn, the intrepid tabloid journalist he loathes for her interference and admires for her tenacity remains at his feet, a tiny ginger gazelle trapped and trembling before the mighty lion that would devour her whole. The day is young…

"Because I always keep my promises." Hannibal says on a cheery note just for her.

Lounds' chin drops, her tongue wriggles helplessly across her teeth. "I'll scream all the way down the steps."

"And make me break my promise? Is that what you want?"

The coppery curls shake from side to side. "What do *you* want?" Relief cracks in her voice, her expression incredulous.

Hannibal thinks her eyes look like large blue saucers as he stares down into them. Lounds is crude but perceptive, too perceptive for her own good. Since she is here, Hannibal intends to avail himself of Lounds' particular talents and make Du Maurier sing for her supper. It has been a long time since dear Bedelia actively participated in acquiring the meat for the meal.

His priority is Will. Pazzi can make a move on him anytime and Hannibal does not put it past Pazzi to take advantage of Will's weakened condition to strike at the hospital before Will has a chance to recover from the arduous ordeal Du Maurier prompted. There simply is not enough time to devote to Miss Lounds the attention she deserves this morning. It does seem that Lounds is always landing on her feet. Well, a cat may have nine lives, but only one liver.

"I'll tell you over coffee. There's a delightful café across the street. Will you join me?"

"Coffee. In a public place."

"Yes."

Lounds takes the hand that has not moved from in front of her face. It feels cool and the grip is strong as it lifts her up effortlessly from the floor. She would be but a bag of bones slung over his shoulder and she would be powerless to stop him. Her limbs feel like icicles, and she sways a little unsteadily as she fixes her blouse. She looks up into the dark hooded eyes and wonders what he sees when he looks at her. What cut of meat does he contemplate cutting from her as those dark eyes roll over her flesh?

“Empty your pockets first.”

Hannibal takes the few items as Lounds dutifully hands them to him. He notes the lip gloss and other sundries he had no idea could fit in the numerous pockets of her outfit and eagerly accepts the wallet when it comes. The wallet is the item he hoped Uncle Jack had not taken from her. She would need her money, cards, and identification to get around the city and Jack would have wanted her to get as far from the crime scene as possible.

“Were you escorted from Boboli this morning?” Hannibal peruses her wallet aware Lounds stands with arms crossed and lips pressed tight. He nods to the keys and cosmetics spread upon the coffee table. “You can put those back.”

“Yes, I was escorted. By Policia. But only to the parking lot.”

Lounds begins to collect her things and stuff them back into her pockets. Hannibal avails himself of her momentary distraction to lift what he wants from her wallet. As Lounds picks up the last item from the table Hannibal hands her the wallet.

“Did you drive?”

Lounds slips her wallet back into the pale jacket liner instantly suspicious. “Taxi. Paid with credit card. All traceable.”

Taxi drivers in Florence do not roam freely looking for fares. There are specific locations throughout the city to engage their services and most are not equipped to take credit. Savvy tourists call ahead and ask. Locals know to carry cash.

“How many cab drivers before you found one who accepted your Visa card?”

Lounds looks aside and Hannibal tilts his head, purses his lips, “There’s no receipt for a cab, Miss Lounds.”

Lounds’ eyes crease with worry and she opens her mouth, a helpless gesture she realizes as she gazes at the mouth of the monster. The monster isn’t baring his teeth but Lounds experiences tightness around her throat regardless.

“My advice would tend toward caution in the future. After you.” Hannibal says, gesturing toward the door.

Somewhat heartened by Lecter’s advice she considers Lecter’s appearance as she shuffles down the stairs. She decides Lecter has given himself quite the makeover. Gone are the three piece suits he wore in Baltimore. Gone too are the ash blonde locks and the immaculately shaved face. The clothes are stylish, the cut of the trousers, jacket and shirt very Italian and he wears them well. Lecter is as solid as a tree trunk, sleek and powerful. The sun kissed skin, longer brown hair and the stubble are oddly reminiscent of…Graham. Couples’ therapy, indeed. Lounds’ heart gives another lurch. Missed Graham so much he changed his appearance in homage. The cannibal is in love. He even chained his beloved to the ground completely naked so everyone would know it.

As he moves along behind her she senses the lightness in his step, a certain *joie de vivre* that has nothing to do with terrorizing her at the moment. He is not only pleased with himself, he is pleased with everything. Lounds receives the distinct impression she walks with a happy cannibal.

Careful, Miss Lounds. You might provoke someone who was very distressed to learn you were still alive.

Lounds thinks Lecter far less distressed than Graham seems to feel regret for not killing her. Graham's warnings have always sounded more like threats. He's not being sarcastic, either. Lounds knows sarcasm; sarcasm is her preferred idiom, the mode of communication with which she is most comfortable. When Graham takes sarcasm out for a walk, it becomes a beast.

Miss Lounds, it's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living.

Are you still angry I called you insane? The libel laws are clear, Mr. Graham

Insinuation is such a grey area.

Graham really did chase after Lecter all the way to Florence to rekindle the romance. Jack Crawford really has lost his mind. He is staking his career on the unstable Graham. Or, maybe Crawford isn't in denial and he intends to capture both killers this time. Lounds thinks all of them are crazy. The potential collateral damage from this epic man hunt is incalculable and the potential audience appeal…priceless. As they exit through the back door of Clayton's office building Lounds runs through the evidence as she sees it before she sits down to coffee with the architect of madness.

The first tableaux could have been two love letters from Lecter. Graham's arrival in Florence seems to have coincided with the murders and there had not been enough evidence to support her story of an exchange of valentines. Graham's interpretations had been compelling if not convoluted, but Lounds had run with her story anyway. Sure enough a couple days later, Graham had killed and gutted a man in an alley, with Lecter at his side, killing the other one. Crawford would not confirm the identities of the victims, and neither would he confirm Graham had been involved. But the Polizia had. The victims had been relatives of the victims in the tableaux. And this morning, Graham is found chained up and gloriously nude in front of a dead Polizia detective arranged like Saint Sebastian against a tree. Lecter is a reporter's dream. You can't make this stuff up.

The thought had occurred to Lounds as recently as yesterday that Graham might actually be caught in the middle, perhaps had been all along. She could have been persuaded to believe he had profiled Lecter so well that he had dissociated for a while. If Graham had been trying to help Crawford, being the object of Lecter's affection was nothing he had any control over. Crawford is aware and continues to allow Graham within Lecter's sphere of influence. If Lecter had decided he wanted Graham, she concedes there is not much Graham could have done about it. Except kill him.

But, Graham had not killed him even though he'd had his chance.

One thing is certain and that is Graham can never be free of Lecter unless Lecter is dead or locked up. And even then…

Graham does protest too much, however. Had he not followed Lecter to Florence on the heels of his meltdown last year his cries of foul might have had had some merit. A sane person would have disappeared, fled, kept away. Crawford argues that it takes someone with Graham's unique sensitivity to unravel Lecter's mind. Graham is the one who is unraveled. And the more unraveled he becomes; the more attractive he is to Lecter. Lecter had made a banquet of him this morning. The possibility exists that Lecter punished Graham for engaging a new psychiatrist. Graham has replaced Lecter with someone new. A callously brilliant strategy on Graham's part and possibly what prompted the impromptu therapy she interrupted.

She is more intrigued than ever. Lecter is far more devious and sophisticated than Abel Gideon. Assisting Gideon dissect Frederick Chilton had been a nightmarish descent into madness for her. A horror to listen to Gideon narrate his surgery while Chilton lay doped up but aware of every organ being removed from his body as she had watched while squeezing the ventilator bag, an unwilling participant in a sickening home movie. She thinks Lecter has something less grotesque in mind. Her mind is already sizzling with the possible stories she can spin from this experience. Freddie Lounds talks madness and murder over cappuccino with Hannibal Lecter and lives…she hopes.

Nothing sells better than a survival story.

I wouldn't count us as survivors just yet, Freddie.

They cross the street, Lecter holds her arm as they step up to the curb and amble toward the café, Hannibal chooses the al fresco seating under a spacious awning. She is guided to a chair which is pulled out for her. She sits and folds her hands on the table watching Lecter take his seat, gazing around once before settling into his chair that allows him to view the entire street. He crosses one long leg over the other, a graceful movement, a practiced pose, and rests his hands in his lap as he gazes at her across the table.

Couples' therapy.

Lecter would call his association with Clayton therapy and no doubt insist Clayton do the same. Clayton would be bound by professional ethics to keep Lecter's confidence behind a veil of privilege. Clayton can't legally discuss either of his *patients* without breaking confidentiality. Talking about one is to talk about the other. Clayton is immune from FBI questioning to a degree. Lecter probably insisted they meet in his office. Lecter has placed Clayton in a precarious situation that offers him some protection while subjecting him to unimaginable danger at the same time.

Lounds wonders if Lecter is sleeping with one, or both of them. Perhaps all three of them are engaged in a ménage à trois and calling it therapy. A Gordian knot hopelessly snarled, impossible to untangle except with a knife and Lecter will be the one holding the blade. Or, Clayton is a pawn, the unfortunate mark in a twisted gothic version of Dangerous Liaisons. Had Lecter been playing therapist or patient with Clayton? Potential suitor or jealous lover?

The mind games alone must be staggering. And all of it locked behind a wall of professional privilege.

Lecter is meeting with her under no such umbrella of protection save the awning of a café fully conscious nothing discussed between them is privileged. What he could possibly want from her? Her visit to Clayton's office was unexpected. They are sitting here about to order coffee on a whim. Whatever he wants, he decided he wanted it in the last couple minutes.

After ordering large cappuccinos for both of them, Hannibal relaxes into his chair remembering his last visit to this café. He had sat at this same table with his art supplies, sketching the street while waiting to see Clayton for the first time. The young doctor struggling with his gym bag in the back seat that day is no more. Innocence can never last.

He turns his attention to Lounds for whom innocence was a burden shed a long time ago. He notes the gleam in her eyes as her mind conducts its careful calculus of her options. There is a certain defiant lilt to her chin and Hannibal admires the frightened creature in his jungle. She is astute enough to know how contemptable it is to show fear. He knows the nature of the stew brewing in Lounds' head and stirring the pot will serve both their interests.

"Your exploitive brand of journalism is hurtful, Miss Lounds."

"Not nearly as hurtful as what you did to Ruggerio."

"I disagree. Detective Ruggerio had barely time to feel anything at all. The pen is often mightier than the sword, the wounds it inflicts bleed for a long time.

Lounds squirms in her seat feeling quite warm suddenly as Lecter lifts a provocative brow and she averts her gaze. "Did you both kill him?" She demurs.

"Tsk. Tsk. We haven't even enjoyed our cappuccinos yet. Courtesy, Miss Lounds is the cornerstone of civilization."

"Aren't you concerned about civilization noticing you sitting here?"

"Most people are concerned only with themselves. I have been in plain sight for a year. Tell me, what was your first thought when you first feasted your eyes upon the tableau this morning?"

His question prompts more thoughts better left unspoken. Lounds wrinkles her nose and opens her mouth then hesitates, unsure how to answer. She startles as Lecter interrupts her editing.

"No, no, no. No sanitized litany of scorn." Hannibal says shaking his head, "No fear of reprisal either. I prefer you be candid with me."

"All right" Lounds fingernails tap impatiently, insistently upon the glass tabletop game for a little quid pro quo if playing means Lecter reciprocates in kind. "My first thought was I couldn't believe you had killed him."

"Meaning Will."

"Yes."

"When you thought he was dead, how did that make you feel?"

"Confused. Wrong. Like my instincts were all wrong."

"No sympathy?"

"I felt…sad for the waste. That for all he's suffered that this is how it ended for him. Then I realized he wasn't dead. That they were tweezing organ pieces off his body while they figured out how to get him out of the chains."

“And you felt…better?”

“Vindicated.” She says evenly, but is quick to add, “Will Graham has made his bed. And now we all know who he shares it with.”

She scrutinizes Lecter’s face for some sign of emotion, but finds only the mild mask she always sees plastered there, immovable as stone.

“Thank you, Miss Lounds. Rarely do people acknowledge how the prospect of death in another prompts a true understanding of self.”

“Huh…and how does the prospect of death in others affect you, Doctor Lecter?”

“It is the prospect of death that drives us to greatness. Death can be very transformative.”

The brown haired barista approaches with their cappuccinos; her gait relaxed and sure as she circles their table and sets down the huge saucers and cups of hot roasted coffee and steamy clouds of cinnamon topped froth.

“Ah, *Signore*. So nice to see you again. *Per favore*, tell me this is your daughter or I will be so jealous.”

Hannibal smiles in surprise as he looks at Lounds, whose mouth hangs open, mind too stunned to send the correct signal to close it up. The smile breaks into a grin and Hannibal feels the creases crinkle with amusement as something like a genuine tickle warms him all over. He looks up at the pouting barista and shakes his head slightly before turning once again to the speechless Lounds.

“She isn’t, but I really can’t imagine a daughter lovelier.” He smiles tenderly at Lounds.

“You break my heart.” The girl says, placing a hand over her breast before walking back inside.

“Charming isn’t she?” Hannibal asks.

“Only because she doesn’t know you.” Lounds moans over her cup.

“Not used to compliments are you, Miss Lounds.”

“I like them when they are sincere.” Lounds counters.

“Didn’t get many growing up though did you? Pale, freckled, an awkward colt with an unruly coppery mane and disposition to match. Developed a thick skin.”

“Psychoanalyzing is a compulsion for you. Don’t psychoanalyze yourself much though, do you?”

“Compulsions are extensions of instinct. What do your instincts tell you?”

Hannibal leans over slightly to take up the aromas and looks deeply into two distrustful blue eyes. Lounds looks down at her cup a moment to look back up with a pained smile, the sting of childhood still smarting across glossy red lips.

Lounds’ dogged pursuit of Abigail has not been forgotten nor has the part she played in Will and Jack’s deception. Lounds is possessed of a quick mind and could have made a career out of her fascination with murder as an investigator, likely an excellent one. Of course that would demand that she follow protocols and her superiors. The pain of being overlooked and relegated to the sidelines, always the last one picked resonates still. Recognition of her innate talents is at the root of her attention seeking. Lounds understands her nature. Playing by the rules has never worked for her. She prefers to operate outside the law, until it becomes necessary to seek its protection. It is a preference that suits Hannibal's purpose for the time being. She will invariably do something consistent with her nature and because she insists on remaining within Hannibal's orbit, there will be consequences. There are always consequences.

Lounds sits with fingers wrapped around her cup, waiting, calculating, and strategizing.

"I read your blog faithfully, Miss Lounds. Was your report based on your own observations or from an unnamed source?"

"A bit of both."

"Would your unnamed source be Policia?"

Lounds blows across her cup so the milky foam rolls across the surface of the steaming coffee as she thinks about her answer. She lifts her eyes to Hannibal's and decides to give him this one.

"And if it was?"

"If it was the Policia captain I am thinking of then you should know that you are being played."

"How's that?"

"There is a web of deceit here that you have only begun to unravel. Think. Why did he tell you about Clayton? What is his agenda?"

"So you would know Graham has a double. But you already knew. Pazzi doesn't know that you know." Lounds frowns.

"Why did you come to Clayton's office? Clayton has been helping the FBI. Pazzi would have known Clayton wasn't supposed to be here except I interrupted him on his way to the hospital."

"I…wanted to investigate a little before going to the Careggi Hospital. My choice."

"You wanted to grill the staff. So Pazzi didn't send you here. Do you know why Clayton is helping the FBI?"

"Obviously to play decoy. Graham has not been at Piazza Repubblica all week, Clayton has."

Hannibal nods, "Do you know who the victims were?"

"All four were Paolini. Word is they are out to kill you for killing the brother and sister."

"Not just me. Will, too." Hannibal watches Lounds' expression carefully. He allows her to assimilate, make her own associations before introducing ideas that will cause her to jump from her current train of thought onto his.

Lounds thinks she is hearing another confession, another admission that corroborates her theory and she squirms in her seat, toes restlessly flexing inside her shoes. She lifts the heavy cup and sips at the cappuccino careful to avoid the froth. Lecter must not be worried what she'll post at this point. He does not appear worried about anything at all. Unless he is confessing everything to her before he kills her.

“The Paolini work for Mason Verger.” Hannibal pauses, notes the tic of eye liner, the involuntary flinch of her brow. “You didn’t know. They raise his pigs here in Tuscany and in the states.” Hannibal sips his cappuccino, smacks his lips as he sets the cup back in its saucer thinking he must ask the barista about purchasing a pound of the beans.

Lounds sets down her cup as the puzzle pieces in her head shuffle around. She slowly traces her finger around the saucer and stares into the speckled froth. Clayton is a decoy for the Paolini. They would mistake Clayton’s comings and goings from FBI headquarters in Piazzi Repubblica for Graham’s, just like she had. Crawford is trying to protect Graham from another assault like the one in the alley, and protect Clayton, too. Clayton is basically in FBI protective custody because of his association with Graham.

“Verger’s accident. You and Graham were involved. It’s Mason Verger who wants him dead. And he wants you, too. So, Graham didn’t make one of the first tableaux?”

Hannibal shakes his head, an ambiguous gesture and one that Lounds is free to interpret as she pleases. “Captain Pazzi is aware of all this. So the question remains, why would Pazzi tell you?”

“So that Jack Crawford can’t use Clayton as a decoy anymore. He wants the Paolini to know they are watching the wrong guy. And he’s using me to tell them. If I post it, Jack Crawford can’t trace the leak to him. Why does Pazzi want to undermine Jack Crawford?”

“That is a very good question.” Hannibal agrees.

He takes another long swallow from his cup, eyes on the street and Clayton’s office. He watches Maria and the pretty Constanzia walk around to the back of the building, watches Maria note the absence of Clayton’s car as she swiftly walks past the empty parking spot. Another car pulls up to the spot and it eases into the space. The driver is a woman with short layered hair, dark with streaked highlights. She finishes her parallel park job and climbs out of the silver BMW with her attaché case. Clayton’s substitute psychiatrist Doctor Lorenzo no doubt.

“You and Graham caused Verger’s accident.” Lounds says.

“Mason is unforgivably rude and discourteous. He drew first blood. Not me. Not Will.”

“How is Clayton involved? Where does he fit it?”

“He is Will’s psychiatrist. I admit I did not leave him much choice but to see me this morning. I imagine he’ll tell Will when he sees him at the hospital.”

“Will doesn’t know?”

“That I made an appointment with his psychiatrist? No.”

“Will really didn’t kill Detective Ruggerio?”

“Will was a victim of circumstance. His disorientation this morning was as real as his discomfort when he awoke.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Lounds tables her disappointment at the evasion, figuring Hannibal would neither confirm nor deny, but hoping anyway. “You know I can’t substantiate any of it. No one will believe I had this conversation without concrete evidence.”

“The FBI and Polizia want to catch me. I don’t want to be caught. They are however, putting Will at risk with the Paolini to try and catch me. I would not have Mason Verger rob me of what is mine to take. I have not forgotten your little ruse, Miss Lounds.”

“So what do you expect me to do?”

“You can write a more informed column. There is an element Jack Crawford is not sharing with Captain Pazzi.”

“What kind of element?”

“I can’t tell you that. But I can tell you where to look. If you are going to write about me. About Will. Better the devil you know.”

“Sounds like Florence is populated with devils.”

“We are all children of Adam’s transgression, at the mercy of the serpent are we not?” Hannibal looks directly into the wide blue eyes as he speaks, “Have you ever been to Fiesole?”

“No. I learned Doctor Clayton lives there.” Lounds is practically holding her breath as her body twitches beneath Lecter’s scrutiny.

“He does. It is also lovely wine country. There’s an estate winery there, Fiore I believe the name is. A most provocative blonde vintage can be found among its guest cottages.”

Lounds purses her dry lips and stares into her barely touched cup of dissolving froth and tepid espresso. Her appetite for food nonexistent, but she relishes the idea of locating this delectable tidbit of Crawford’s. She is being used by Lecter in his game with the FBI and Policia. The game he plays with Graham remains indefinable. But it is not her job to choose sides. Like the naturalist following animals in the wild, she cannot prevent the lion from killing his prey; she can only record the hunt and hope the prey gets away.

“A tempting bid for my cooperation, not to crack wise, but you shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when it has teeth.”

“Curious you use that metaphor.” Hannibal slides his tongue over his teeth, thoughts as tasty as the sweet rich cappuccino. Lounds’ role in the epic tragedy made real by her own words. “Perhaps you can avoid the fate of the poor tragic Cassandra, then.”

“Who?”

“Cassandra, punished by Apollo, her prophecies never believed. She is the prophetess who warned everyone about the Greeks hiding in the Trojan horse.”

“That’s where the saying comes from? Cassandra said that. Huh…you want me to play Cassandra and warn the Trojans about a gift?”

“Well, hardly much difference between Greeks and Trojans for us is there? Cassandra requires credibility to be believed.”

“And this blonde vintage in Fiesole will what…bolster my credibility? With Crawford?”

“The ancient Greeks believed the snakes in Apollo’s temple could bestow the gift of prophecy and knowledge. In Fiesole is the temple. You have the opportunity to allow the snake to lick your ear.”

“The Fiore estate?”

Hannibal nods, “If you’re interested in having something to bargain with Jack Crawford.”

“I’m wondering how this benefits you.”

“And I’m wondering if how this benefits me should be your primary concern. Your primary concern should be if I do not benefit from your actions.”

“I uh…see your point.” Lounds’ face creases with defeat.

“You might even consider taking Agent Crawford along.”

“I’ll consider it.” Lounds says already dismissing the idea.

The most dangerous person in Florence is sitting across from her and his close second is likely already in Ospidale di Careggi receiving fluids through an IV while Crawford tries to convince him to agree to a battery of forensic testing. Unless the Paolini have taken up vinification, Lounds is confident that a look around before contacting Crawford involves nothing more inconvenient than a trespassing charge.

“Seems you’ve given me food for thought, Doctor Lecter.”

“You’re welcome. Sustenance comes in many forms. Perhaps next time we meet, you’ll stay for lunch.” Hannibal says, fingers already reaching inside his jacket.

Lounds’ face blanches. He removes his wallet from the inner pocket and focuses his gaze on the ginger gazelle who takes the hint and rises from her chair as though in a daze. Lounds glances around the café, looks up and down the street, uncertainty stitched across finely drawn brows. Hannibal waits for her brain to wade through the emotional pool that momentarily drowns reason.

Lounds pulls herself together, resolve returning to strengthen her from within, steadying legs that no longer feel like twigs about to snap. She offers a parting nod at Lecter and after patting her pockets, reassuring herself that her wallet and keys remain she makes her way out from beneath the awning and onto the sidewalk. She turns her head once more to glance at Lecter, but he is already gone. A pair of Euros peeks out from beneath his cup and saucer, his chair tucked perfectly under the table.

Daniel clutches his phone as he sits in Ospidale di Carregi’s parking lot. He holds his finger over the screen staring at the numbers he has punched in twice already, only to cancel the call. The glove compartment beckons, another few milligrams of valium wouldn’t hurt, would it? He clenches his teeth together, sighs and stares up through the opened roof at concrete, girders, and fluttering pigeons.

He needs to know if anyone is there to pick up the phone at his office. He needs to know that his staff is unaware of what went on, and if they are…alive. Will will want to know and he will ask him if he did the logical thing and call to check in. Daniel takes a breath and completes the call; the seconds tic in sync with the rapid beating of his heart.

"*Buongiorno. Ventresca e Associate*. *Como posso aiutarla*?"

"Maria?" Daniel breathes into the phone, "It's Doctor Clayton."

"Where are you?" Maria scolds, "I come back from the post office and you were gone. Left the back door unlocked. Good thing I got here before Doctor Lorenzo…"

"Is Constanzia with you?" Daniel grips the phone with sweaty palms, his stomach in turmoil.

"Ai, she came in later, at seven thirty and we went to the post office together. You were upstairs with Boucher and we thought that was okay."

"You thought just fine. I had to leave and I completely forgot to lock up."

"You had to cut your visit short? Is this about Signore Graham? Is he all right?"

"Oh, you saw the news this morning?"

"Can't avoid it. You are going to see him?"

"Yeah. I'm at the hospital. I just…I'm not getting enough sleep. I apologize."

"You need to take better care of yourself. Tell the FBI this is too much. Take a couple days off. Come back and leave them to do their jobs while you do yours."

"I'm definitely thinking about it."

"I know you worry for Signore Graham. Can't you just take care of him and your practice?"

"And forget all about the FBI. Yes. That sounds like a good idea. Doctor Lorenzo made it in? Everything is…okay?"

"Well, you left your office in a bit of mess."

Damn him… "What kind of mess?"

"You put all that left over food and fruit in the wastebasket. All kinds of flies in there now. A couple of hours and it would have smelled terrible…lunch meat left out like that."

"Again, I apologize. I wasn't thinking."

"Don't worry about it. By the way, what was in the bag? A present?"

"You know, it's in the back seat. I didn't even look yet. I'll let you know."

"Call back when you can. I'll keep you and Signore Graham in my prayers."

"I'll tell him that. Thanks Maria."

He can't do anything about Lounds, but at least Hannibal kept his word and conducted his business elsewhere. For now, his staff is okay and his involvement with Hannibal remains unknown. This kind of stress is nerve wracking, unnatural. He thinks a tax audit would be a welcome change. Will thinks Daniel has held up admirably, but both of them know why. Daniel is becoming more like Will all the time.

Daniel shoves his phone into his jacket, draws another deep sigh and reaches for the black athletic bag in the other seat. He has piled the clothes and shoes he brought for Will on top leaving Hannibal's bag wedged at the bottom. Hospitals don't usually have security concerns, but he thinks Crawford or Pazzi might assign someone to watch Will, especially if Crawford wanted Will to stay put and not run off the reservation again.

Sure enough, a Polizia officer stands next to Will's semi-private room. He nods at Daniel and points to the gym bag.

"*Chi sei*?

"Doctor Daniel Clayton. *Son il suo il psyichiatra*."

"*Che cosa è in là*?"

"Change of clothes and shoes for him." Daniel nods at the door. "Deodorant and stuff. *È che va bene*?"

He stands holding the bag while the officer performs a cursory search and waves him inside. The first bed is empty but the bed by the window is occupied, Daniel can see the outline of feet and legs beneath the blankets though a privacy curtain blocks the rest of the bed from view.

Will is already looking for him when Daniel comes round the curtain. He offers Daniel a lazy smile of welcome and the pale blue eyes appear more wearied than usual. Daniel feels that curious ache across his stomach and the familiar pang in his chest as he gazes at Will in the hospital bed, beleaguered but not broken. He wears a hospital gown beneath the blankets and there is an IV hooked up to one arm, an EKG monitor secured to his forefinger. He appears uninjured though Daniel notices the chafing around his wrists and assumes his ankles bear marks as well. He appears to have scrubbed up in the shower, no smudges of dirt on him and his hair hangs in damp ringlets over his head.

Will inclines his head at Daniel, amused at the awkward hesitation though he shouldn't be considering Daniel probably tossed and turned all night wondering what had happened. Daniel's gentle mist fills the room and Will's smile broadens as he catches a whiff of his cologne and notices the dog hair clinging to his trousers.

Restraint evaporates with the sudden smile from Will and Daniel drops the athletic bag and pulls the curtain out all the way so it curves around the bed. He crosses to the startled Will quickly before he loses his nerve or thinks too much and covers the delicious pliant mouth that opens in surprise as his lips press hard, the touching of tongues tickles the sensation sweetly crackling along nerves.

Will closes his eyes, drawing comfort from the warm mouth and tender lips, Daniel's mist rolls over him and the scent of ocean he had tried so hard to summon earlier filters up from the soft strands of curls he folds between grateful fingers. The touch of Daniel's hands as they grip his shoulders is gentle yet urgent and Will feels a pang of shame, another stab to a heart already scored with wounds. And yet, the balm Daniel offers soothes the wounds, his joy at seeing Will effusive and radiant.

The kiss lasts but a few seconds, but it is enough. Will wipes his mouth as Daniel pulls back, stands up straight and grins a sheepish lop-sided grin. He stuffs his hands in the pockets of his trousers before he grabs at the toes flinching under the blankets like he wants to.

"Hello, Will." Daniel says.

"And hello to you, too." Will says. "I guess I'm forgiven for not calling?"

"No. But, I guess it's a good thing you didn't tell me much. I think I would have told Jack everything if I knew." Daniel says glancing toward the door beyond the curtain.

"You talked to Jack before this morning?" Will says, sitting up a little straighter.

"Yeah, he came to my house last night when he couldn't get hold of you. I couldn't get you either. Really pushed hard against that doctor patient confidentiality. And I almost folded."

"I knew that would be difficult for you. That's why I didn't tell you."

"Your way of protecting me?" Daniel huffs.

"And me. Going alone was the plan."

"And if you hadn't been followed?"

"None of this would have happened. An unhappy convergence of circumstances." Will looks toward the window, reminds himself Daniel can feel every twist of emotion he experiences. The fort building commences and Will feels the room contract and change as he retreats from Daniel's reach.

Daniel feels the walls erupting inside Will, doors slamming shut all over the place. He's certain it's Ruggerio causing the lock down. The blue eyes stare out the window, chin lowered to chest, the very image of contrition. Will is blocking him out and is sorry he's doing it, but he's doing it anyway. The realization hurts. This is the first time Will has retreated from him since coming to his home. Given what Hannibal told him over their little breakfast, Will has plenty of reasons for not wanting to share his feelings with him right now.

"Will?" Daniel says, easing around to the chair by the window so he can see Will's face full on and Will can see him.

The pale blue eyes sweep over him, reluctant to meet his, but Will manages to fix his gaze and keep it there.

"I'm not going to judge you. You know that, right? I'm not your conscience."

"My conscience is functioning perfectly." Will says.

"Glad to hear that. I'm your anchor, remember? The sea got a little choppy this morning for both of us. You only know your half of the unhappy convergence of circumstances."

Will sucks on his lower lip as he considers Daniel's face. The haggard visage gazing patiently back at him mirrors his own. Will's demands have been hard on Daniel and he has stepped up without complaint. Daniel laid his shield down for Will a while ago and has not picked it up again. He continues to allow Will emotional access to him, even now when he must feel how closed Will is.

Will knows he should be truthful about Ruggerio and everything else but this hospital room is not the best place to do that. In the meantime, Daniel needs to *feel* Will still trusts him and so Will clears his head as much as he can as he relaxes his mind, unpacks the trunk of ready platitudes, scatters them to dust and opens his fortress to Daniel once again.

“What circumstances are you referring to?” Will asks, reaching up from the bed to close the space between them. His fingers brush across Daniel’s hand perched on the arm of the chair.

Daniel glances down; the fleeting touch is electric prompting a wave of reassurance. Concern flickers behind the pale blue eyes and Daniel feels the prick of Will’s fear along his own spine, a faint but constant pulse. He thinks Will might still be hallucinating. The hallucinations increased with the hypnotherapy he introduced and Daniel has no reason to think Will’s recent exposure to more drugs is without its adverse effects. Will has not had time to recover, from anything. He has been in recovery mode since Baltimore. He is probably hallucinating off and on all the time.

“I brought some clothes for you. There are a few things to choose from. You should um…take a look at everything before you decide.”

Daniel glances toward the door again and Will nods before unzipping the bag. Daniel watches him rummage around and then remove the pile on top to reveal the crumpled paper bag at the bottom. He opens the bag and Will’s eyes grow wide and the lift of his brow says so much that words are unnecessary. The jaw tightens as lips press together into a thin line.

Will’s fingers fondle the grip of his Berretta, magazine still attached and probably still loaded judging by the weight of it. The knife Hannibal gave him is there, too. He feels his wallet and his phone. Of course, Hannibal would want him to have his phone. He pulls the phone from the bag, looks at it a second and decides to turn it on. If Jack is running a trace on it, he will think Hannibal is in the vicinity, which may be entirely possible. At any rate, Jack will not think Will has it. He switches the setting to vibrate only. As the screen lights up, he sees that he has messages.

He scrolls through and finds that Jack has indeed tried to call his number, hoping Hannibal might be in the mood to answer or at least turn on the phone. Will has to leave it on or he’ll miss calls from Hannibal. As long as he’s not engaged in a call, there isn’t much Jack can do. When the phone is in use he can triangulate the phone’s approximate location using three cell towers. Jack already knows Will deactivated the GPS so having the number doesn’t help much.

Jack hasn’t asked for the number Hannibal used to call him from before though Jack assumes Hannibal has Luciano’s phone. He could ask Will for Luciano’s number, but he hasn’t. Jack is allowing Will some wriggle room to operate, but after this morning Will suspects Jack may introduce some caveats to his autonomy. Will already has a response for Jack.

He turns to Daniel, swallows and waits for an explanation. He’d anticipated Hannibal would somehow return his belongings to him and Daniel was the obvious choice, but Hannibal did not simply hand off the bag to Daniel and let him leave. No drive-thru window for Daniel. Hannibal has certainly had his fun this morning and he’s just getting started.

“My office called me this morning before I left the house. Seems one of my patients had an urgent situation and needed to see me. So I was compelled to pick up some breakfast and make a detour on the way here. Hung out for a while.”

Will sinks back into the pillow to study Daniel’s face. “Um…how was that? Hanging out?”

“I think I lack the vocabulary to accurately describe the array of emotions I experienced, but the conversation was very tasty.”

“I’ll bet it was.” Will hangs his head and sighs, “Let’s have it.”

“Looked at a certain blog for starters, then some paintings.” Daniel pauses at the eye roll from Will, doesn’t comment and moves on, “Then, we unpacked breakfast, talked about dinner with an old friend he had the night before with undisguised glee.”

“Glee.”

“Yes. I think that the perfect word.”

“I would have thought perhaps gloat would come to mind.”

“Even better.” Daniel concedes, “A gleeful gloating. Apparently the menu was celebratory, prepared ahead of time, not…impromptu.”

“Did he mention unexpected guests?” Will asks and a perplexed pucker appears between Daniel’s brows.

Daniel frowns, “He mentioned a guest. There was more than one?”

Will shrugs, glances toward the doorway though the curtains are opaque and he can only assume the Policia guard remains at his post.

Daniel grips the arms of the chair and scoots it impatiently across the floor so he sits flush against the bed. He leans in close to Will so he can whisper.

“This is ridiculous having a conversation like this. I’m your psychiatrist. Privileged conversation. Officer friendly can fuck himself.”

Will grins. He was about to suggest the same thing, more or less. The grin fades however, and the gravity of their conversation tugs at the corners of his mouth. Lips purse in anticipation of the course their discussion must follow.

“Ruggerio showed up. I thought it was Pazzi following, but it wasn’t.” Will begins.

The bitterness in Will’s voice is unmistakable. The regret seems to seep from him, his conscience wrung dry in the wake of his actions…whatever they were.

“Go on.” Daniel says gently. “Pazzi was smart. Let Ruggerio run interference, be the sacrifice. Agamemnon really wants his ships to sail.”

Will rubs at his eyes and nods, appreciating Daniel’s grasp of the mad narrative he shares with Hannibal. “Looks like he told Ruggerio to keep it quiet, just observe. But Ruggerio didn’t stop at observing. No backup. It was…too easy.” Will looks aside, remembering.

“Will, this is different than before. Did you…” Daniel stops, rephrases, “Was this a shared sacrifice?”

“No. I was spared that. But I didn’t stop it, either.”

“Do you plan the tableau together?” Daniel whispers almost inaudibly, eyes on the thick white drapes that separate their conversation from law enforcement on the other side.

“No. We might have except another guest showed up and I think the idea for today’s festivities were prompted by that.”

“What happened?”

“Du Maurier showed up. Had dessert with us. Stabbed me with a needle. I drew my gun, but Hannibal stopped me. I passed out. You saw the rest.”

“Jesus Fucking… Did they set you up?”

“I don’t think so. He’s got an agenda for her. That’s why he stopped me.”

Will nods at the athletic bag and Daniel reaches for it at the bottom of the bed. At Will’s silent prompt, he roots through the contents and locates the knife he knows is not Will’s. He shows it to Will briefly before dropping it back in the bag.

“A gift?”

“A symbol of truce, oddly enough. We made an exchange of gifts, right out of the *Iliad*.”

Daniel thinks a moment, “You gave him your belt?” Will nods. “You have Hector’s knife and you gave up Ajax’s belt. Oh God, Will…”

“What?”

“At my office…” Daniel’s face flushes, a deep patch of crimson dread blooms along his throat as he speaks, “He referred to Hector’s death looking at my plates. He played Hector for your truce, but now he has the belt Achilles used to drag Hector’s corpse.”

Will stares at Daniel as implication becomes image; his imagination explodes with visions of Achilles swooning over the body of his beloved Patroclus followed by the fallen Hector, vanquished for taking Patroclus away from him. Daniel blinks back the swell of panic that threatens to spill as he remembers his conversation with Hannibal.

“Daniel…what did he say, exactly?”

Daniel closes his eyes. “He quoted from Priam’s speech to Hector not to fight Achilles alone. I quoted back the bit where he calls Achilles a monster.”

“Good for you. He likes sass.” Will says.

Will remembers that Achilles warned Patroclus not to fight the Trojans alone. Coincidence?

“I think I amused him. But the important thing is he insisted Achilles’ wrath is not the catalyst of Hector’s fate, Patroclus’ actions are.” Daniel reiterates his conversation with Hannibal as he remembers it.

If Patroclus had not taken up Achilles’ armor, he would not have died at Hector’s hands.

You are saying Patroclus set all that happens in motion?

His actions prompted all that came after.

And Achilles' rage and refusal to fight had nothing at all to do with it.

Not directly. What Patroclus does determines the fate of all three of them.

"There is no point in blaming Achilles for behaving like the spoiled god child he is." Will says, plugging a finger into Daniel's knee. "He was going for your emotional response. He's already psychoanalyzed you. He knows as well as I that Patroclus often reacts directly to Achilles' feelings, his empathy with Achilles entwined with his own. Patroclus took up Achilles' armor because Achilles allowed him to. The taint of Achilles hubris fell on Patroclus. Patroclus would not have fallen to Hector had the gods not intervened. The punishment of losing Patroclus was dished out by Apollo."

"Apollo knocked Achilles' helmet off Patroclus, exposed him and invited injury even though wearing Achilles' armor should have protected him. Will, I know the story, too. Patroclus wore the armor to save the Greek ships. He was supposed to stop and not pursue. He ignored Achilles' warning, got caught up in his own passion. I think that's the message here."

"Patroclus had been fighting as well as Achilles until Apollo intervened. Achilles committed hubris and paid the price. Hannibal conveniently left that out."

"Listen to yourself. If Hannibal doesn't see that, then you shouldn't see it, either. See what he sees and be honest with yourself. What affects Achilles, affects Patroclus."

Will runs fingers through disheveled locks, finally dry from the shower he took earlier and stares out the window behind Daniel's head. All the conversations he's had with Hannibal, with himself in his inferno echo through his consciousness.

"Hannibal…wants his Patroclus and his Adam. His creation and his equal in one. The only thing Patroclus and Adam have in common is that their company is preferred alone. If Patroclus gives in to his passion," Will pauses and looks squarely at Daniel, "…if he wears false armor into battle, he too commits hubris, and Achilles' wrath will fall with the full force of God behind it."

"If you are both Patroclus and Adam; Hannibal is both Achilles and God."

Daniel's head throbs, not just because of the mixed metaphors, either. Hector sealed his own fate by taking advantage of the wounded Patroclus. Hector had taken Patroclus from Achilles with a spear. Daniel would take Will with something far more powerful. Daniel thinks Hannibal finds him much more the threat than Hector. Perhaps it is only because Hector looks so much like Patroclus that Achilles has stayed his wrath and his hand thus far.

"Then, what was he getting at, Will?" Daniel says, hoping Will sees this on his own. "He associates me with Hector; that much is clear. And if he follows the narrative, I am destined to have that belt tied around my feet."

"He's suggesting that I be careful whose armor I put on. He knew you would tell me all this."

"He's telling you not to put him in the position in the first place. I get that. But we're already… involved."

“A situation he is prepared to tolerate. For a while. He has expectations veiled behind sins of omission.”

“What’s he omitting?”

“That I should be equally careful with whom I take my armor off.”

“Well, on that we can agree, but here’s something else just to mix things up a little more. He suggested that um…here, let me show you instead.”

Daniel grabs the straw from Will’s cup of ice water and takes the knife from the athletic bag. He cuts the straw into three pieces and slips the knife quickly into the bag while Will watches completely mystified. Hannibal must have really shaken Daniel up this morning.

“Did you take some meds this morning?” Will asks carefully neutral.

“Not enough believe me. Look…” Daniel arranges the straws in a row like he had for Hannibal. “He asked how I saw the relationship between the three of us. Pretend this is the knife, this is the fork, and this the spoon. I’m the spoon, you are the fork, and he’s the knife.”

“Okay. I get the analogy.”

“Then he says he sees it like this.”

Daniel places the straws in the shape of a triangle. Will sighs and bites his lip, looks up at Daniel to find a hopelessly helpless expression on his face. No wonder Daniel is flustered.

“Talk about mixed messages.” Will says. “Did he say he sees it like this now?”

“Potentially. Suggested that you have already extended an invitation.”

Will leans back into his pillow and offers Daniel a tired smile. “He was fishing. To see how you would react.”

“Well, he um…fished some more.”

“How’s that?”

“While on the topic of invitations into private universes, he asked if I wanted an invitation from him.”

“The devil knocked on your door.” Will says raising a brow.

“Yes. And then he kissed me.”

Will’s face goes completely blank as though every muscle is as stunned as his brain. Lips part in disbelief as Will absorbs the words and images of Hannibal and Daniel in a tight embrace dance around his head. Hannibal had planted the seeds of hope in Daniel with the triangle. He had put Daniel at ease, enough for him to allow intimacy by degrees until Hannibal could at last touch what Will had touched, hold it close, taste it, and pollute it.

Hannibal knows Daniel would tell him. It is Daniel’s nature to be honest. Daniel would not harbor such a secret and pretend to advise Will on his conduct. Besides, Daniel would figure Hannibal would not wait long for the opportunity to throw it back at both of them, ideally together.

As Will looks into Daniel's eyes, he knows Daniel understands the paradigm. Ever the surrogate. Hannibal misses intimacy with Will and after Du Maurier robbed him of opportunity last night, although there had been no guarantee Will tells himself…repeatedly, Hannibal had approached Daniel this morning instead.

Hannibal would not have forced it. He gained Daniel's trust first and though Daniel had not overtly invited the kiss, he had not resisted either. Daniel's instinct would have been to acquiesce and survive. He had likely been attracted and curious. The opportunity to experience the creature, the man who haunts his patient, with Daniel's special kind of empathy would have been impossible to ignore. For the duration of that kiss, Daniel had felt what Hannibal had been feeling and had reacted to it.

Daniel does it with Will all the time. Daniel sits in that chair, a still silhouette against streaming sunlight the only person to know intimately what Hannibal and Will can only imagine about the other. Had Hannibal realized that he had allowed Daniel to really know him?

Will startles from his thoughts as Daniel gets up suddenly, steps outside the curtain and takes a long look toward the doorway.

"Still there?" Will whispers hoarsely from his bed.

Daniel walks back to his seat, plunks down and cracks his neck. "Still there, found himself a chair. Looks bored, but I guess that comes with the job."

"As long he's outside the door."

Daniel shuffles his feet along the floor. "Will…he um…asked me about my gift. I didn't confirm anything but he knows. And that kiss was meant for you."

"Meaning he wanted you to tell me about it."

"Yes. But, he was momentarily kissing *you.* He forgot himself. Got lost in the moment. That… surprised him. He was embarrassed, Will."

"Caught him with his pants down, huh?"

"Might as well have. I don't think he planned on sharing so much. What I felt was…heat and fire. Blistering longing and need. You are for him the only source of water on the planet, the only fountain he wants to drink from. And he fears that power you have over him. It's why he cut you in Baltimore, Will. Part of it was Lounds, but the rage…was at himself, for falling for you."

"I know. What I don't know is if he still rages over it. He's afraid I mean to exploit it again. And whatever he's got going on with Du Maurier is threatened by it, at least she thinks so. He made overtures to a happy threesome with her, too. He doesn't mean it, Daniel."

"Oh, I think he sees his love for you as a weakness very clearly. I felt what he was feeling when he remembered who he was kissing this morning. Or rather, who he wasn't." Daniel catches the frown and the impatient toss of Will's tousled head. "Yes, love Will. We've talked around and around this. He hates you because he loves you." *Sound familiar?*

“Well, he’ll never say it. I can’t even imagine him saying it.”

“You want him to…say it?”

Will’s hands come up immediately. “No…no.”

“But, you’ve tried?” Daniel says with a smile. “Tried to imagine him saying it to you?”

“Stop.” Will bites his tongue hard. Daniel is so goddamned perceptive it is infuriating. And he teases relentlessly. Will can’t tell him how many times he’s imagined himself saying something similar to him. Will clears his throat and glares at Daniel before he continues.

“It’s what Du Maurier wants to exploit. She thinks I’ve ruined her relationship with him, whatever that was.”

“It’s not based on love. She is incapable of that emotion. She’s aware. She’s sad about that, recognizes that emotion is missing, but she can’t fabricate something that isn’t there, something that she has never felt.”

“Could be why she fabricates insight with her patients. Calls it curiosity but she’s trying to understand the emotion.”

“She wants to take you out.”

“She’s been interfering all along. Just wearing different hats. Her person suit is buttoned up tighter than Hannibal’s.”

“Hats… You know what? I asked Hannibal where he got real eagle feathers on such short notice. You know what he said? From one of Du Maurier’s hats.”

“Hannibal gave you information on the crime scene?”

Will rolls his eyes to the ceiling. Hannibal is weeding his garden. Du Maurier just doesn’t know she’s a weed. She thinks she’s a swan.

“You can figure out how to bring that up, if you wanted to. Do you want to?” Daniel asks.

“Help Hannibal frame her? If it’s evidence, planted or not, it’s still part of the scene. I’ll let forensics do what they want with it. Maybe I’ll mention something if the opportunity comes up. Zee and Price are pretty good. I may not have to say anything at all.”

“What did she do to light such a fire? Do you think she failed him in some way?”

“I think maybe they were curious together for a while. Maybe while they were committing atrocities and malpractice upon their patients, Hannibal actually found something he valued she never did. I asked him how many there were before me. And I got the impression there had been many. Du Maurier also made a point of saying that.”

How many have there been? Like Randall Tier? Like me?

Every patient is unique.

Your psychiatrist came to visit me at the hospital before my trial. Dr. Du Maurier. She told me she believed me. She knew there were others like me.

Fascinating

“She is a viper, Will. You know what she was doing, right? Just in case you were enamored of the idea that you might be special to him, she shot it down. Let you believe you were only the most recent flame in a long line, including her. Although she places herself in a completely different category, above the livestock.”

“Yes. She is the rare and exquisite swan, but not exempt from Hannibal’s table.”

“And she’s going to strike Hannibal where it hurts most. You.”

“She’ll try and use you as a wedge between us. And he’s looking to strike her where it hurts the most. But I have no idea what that is.”

“Maybe another sin of omission?”

What other benefit does continued association with her offer, besides the sexual? Ask, what is her nature?

“In a manner of speaking. He did tell me to think about her nature.”

“She’s vain and materialistic. Speaking of nature, how long do you think you were staked outside last night? Do you remember anything?”

“I had wild hallucinations, dreams. Not all of them…bad. I recall bits of what I think were actual conversations with Hannibal, but they are all disjointed, floating around in here like confetti.” Will points to his head and takes a large gulp of water.

“He really outdid himself with that tableau. Ruggerio died…quickly?”

“Yes.” Will says simply.

“Will…” Daniel stops and folds his hands together and squeezes so muscle tightens clear up his arm.

“What?”

“Are you still contemplating the form of your redemption?”

“Still contemplating, yes. Daniel, my inferno is around me all the time.”

“Do you see it now? Here?”

“The serpent tailed eagle is here. I saw him at Hannibal’s…”

“Well, shit, I guess you would. Felt right at home.”

“And, I hear its talons clicking on the floor, pacing on the other side of the curtain. I know I’m imagining it, that you can’t hear it or see it, and yet it’s like I can’t quite wake up.”

“Your nightmares really have followed you out of your dreams.” Daniel shakes his head. “See anything else?”

“The room changed a couple times. Saw that strange rosebud wallpaper again. Orange night light in the bathroom though it is daytime. Even thought I saw you for a second in the hallway, wearing a white coat like the rest of them. I almost fell out of the bed.”

“Stress. Anxiety. Fear. I can’t imagine being in a hospital puts you at ease.”

“No it doesn’t and it is amazing how often I find myself in one.”

“How about at the crime scene? Any hallucinations there after you woke up?”

“A bit. Disorientation. I felt Zee and Price scraping my stomach and imagined I was back in the inferno being mauled by the creature. But, I shook it off.”

“Shook it off. Fuck, Will. What if you have an episode and the Paolini have hold of you?”

“I guess I don’t have any control over that…”

“You guys back here?” Jack Crawford’s voice booms from the doorway. “Am I interrupting?” Jack says, sliding the curtain aside, large unblinking brown eyes fall on Will and Daniel, their heads inches apart.

“Always.” Will says as he looks up with his usual scowl and Daniel sits upright in his chair.

“Good to see you, too. How are you feeling?”

“Better. Not thirsty anymore.” Will actually smiles and Jack smiles back.

“I can’t stay long, but I’m glad Doctor Clayton is here. Doctor….”

“Agent Crawford.” Daniel inclines his head and scoots his chair back a little.

“Why’s that?” Will says.

“I’ll explain. There are some things you should know about Du Maurier that I have been sitting on, but in light of the tableau this morning, I think we should compare notes.”

Will and Daniel look at each other, and Will wonders just how much Crawford knows, or thinks he knows.

“She contacted you?” Will pauses, thinks she has likely talked to Jack more than once. Of course she has. “When did she call, Jack?”

“After you killed the Paolini in the alley with Hannibal. I know. I should have told you then. Claims she is in contact with Hannibal but would not give up his address or hers. I think her situation with Hannibal is duplicitous and unhealthy, but she wants out of it.”

“You didn’t tell her about the evidence at the crime scenes? The blonde hair?”

“No, but I met with her at a restaurant, yesterday morning. She left hair samples and fingerprints on a wine glass. We didn’t have her prints before. We do now. And the blonde hair is a match.”

“What time yesterday morning did you see her? While I was in Impruneta with Pazzi?”

“About that time. She watched Clayton go into headquarters. Thought it was you.”

“You met with her to offer another immunity deal?” Will says. *She didn’t expect me to be at Hannibal’s villa.*

“Yes. But with conditions this time. She has to actively lead us to Hannibal in order to get that immunity. She can’t leave Florence without it. And it’s starting to look like the only way she’s leaving is in handcuffs.”

Associations whirl through Will’s skull. She jammed a syringe into him first. Hannibal was to be next, but she was interrupted, changed her mind, or Hannibal stopped her. For all Will knows she now rests in his meat locker downstairs…

“Based on hair samples? There were no fingerprints of hers at the crime scenes were there?” Will asks.

“I gave her a GPS tracker. She was supposed to use it to lead us to Hannibal. We found you with it instead this morning. Her prints and Hannibal’s are on it.”

Will is certain Du Maurier’s plan went awry. But, Hannibal had not let him kill her at his house. He was drugged and a shot might have missed, but what was he said?

Will, this…is not the reckoning you want.

Du Maurier is alive. Hannibal let her go despite her betrayal. He wants Will to kill her. He wants Will to kill her…intimately. And he likely wants to watch. Will looks to Daniel. His fingers stroke at the whiskers atop his lips, his usual thoughtful pose when listening to Will. Daniel glances at him and looks down at the floor.

Daniel has just dropped the ball in Will’s lap, letting him know it’s up to him if he wants to disclose to Jack what he knows about Du Maurier and her alias in Fiesole. He’ll back him up or keep silent, whatever Will decides.

“Did you run into her while you were with Hannibal?” Jack asks suddenly, irritably.

“Jack, I barely remember running into Hannibal.”

“You don’t remember anything while you were drugged?”

“I remember my hallucinations, but I didn’t hallucinate about her. Everything I remember was drug induced, Jack. I was basically tripping. Or date raped as Pazzi would tell it.”

Jack lets loose a long frustrated sigh. Opens and closes his hands and shakes his head. “Pazzi…”

“I guess he’s paying Ruggerio’s family a visit?”

“That’s what he said he was doing. I haven’t told him about the blonde hair or anything else. Look, about what happens next. How are you, really? I have reservations about putting you back out there, Will.”

“You have reservations? I have reservations. I’m no good to you Jack. I wasn’t ready. The drugs… prompted hallucinations again.”

“So, now you’re saying you are not mentally fit. Not stable.”

Jack glares into the pale blue eyes staring out from beneath a fringe of curls. The jaw is set, stubborn and tight. Jack concedes Will has been through an emotional ringer. He needs a day off is all. Mason and the Paolini may not even give him that. And Pazzi…

“I’m saying it, Agent Crawford.” Daniel says. “Whatever progress he’s made just got set back. This was…traumatic and highly stressful. My professional recommendation is to NOT put him out there.”

Jack puts on a sour face and looks back and forth between the two of them. After all Will has been through, dragged himself through, he decides now is the time to pull out. Jack had expected the usual denials of his instability or rude sarcasm implying that even broken no one could do what he did better.

“What about the Paolini?” Jack says.

“If the Paolini are going to come, Jack, then maybe that’s your ticket to getting Hannibal. Looks like you struck out with Du Maurier. And I’m um…hitting the bleachers. You’ll have to keep working with what you’ve got. If any more tableaux come up, I’ll interpret the evidence if you want.”

“You think Hannibal knows the Paolini want to use you to capture him?”

“There’s no way to know what I said to him while drugged. Do you know what he gave me?”

“Inconclusive. Drugs degraded, too long in your system to get a read.”

“Then it’s in everyone’s best interest to consider me compromised. I’m sorry Jack. I’m sitting this one out.”

“I’ll have to put a security detail on you.” Jack says.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Jack.” Will counters.

“Okay, Will. Go home when they sign off on you. Rest up. I’ll be in touch…Doctor Clayton. I guess you’ll take good care of him.”

Daniel smiles at Jack, feels the discord inside, disappointment, distrust, and anger churn like bile and the dull ache of loneliness rides on top, the hollowness of him like an eggshell.

“Of course. You don’t need me to come in to headquarters anymore, do you?”

“No. I guess you’re off my hook, too.” Jack offers a polite smile and extends his hand. Daniel rises from his chair to take it. “I know you didn’t have to help, but you did and I do thank you for that.”

The handshake is firm, and Daniel does feel genuineness about Jack as he drops his hand and turns towards the doorway.

“I’ll talk to you later, Jack.” Will calls from his bed as Jack walks off, waving his hand.

Daniel flops back down in his chair. “He is…exhausting to be around.”

Will chuckles, “Oh yes...Uncle Jack. Hannibal calls him that. I think you just nailed why.”

“Hannibal had him over for dinner a lot, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. But Jack doesn’t like to talk about that.”

“I guess not. Look, there’s something else about this morning you have to know before anyone else comes in here.”

“There’s more?”

Daniel fidgets in his seat feeling sick inside. He can’t believe he has to tell Will that he sent Freddie Lounds to Hannibal. He has been trying not to think about it since he left her in his office, but visions of blood soaked Berber carpet assault him and the berating has not ceased. He knows Hannibal didn’t kill her in his office, but he imagines it anyway. He can’t figure out how he got her out of his office without being seen.

“Freddie Lounds came to my office this morning.”

“What?” Will’s mouth drops open again.

“Yeah. She came in while Maria and Constanzia went to the Post Office. Must have picked a lock because Maria is old school about keeping the office locked up. Anyway, we’re upstairs in my office and she hits the intercom downstairs asking for me. She announces who she is and of course I go right down to meet her. Before I leave to go down, Hannibal says to send her up and he promises he won’t leave a mess.”

Will’s pale blue eyes are huge as he stares into Daniel’s nearly tear filled green ones. He can’t believe what he is hearing. He wonders why Daniel didn’t tell him right away and then the realization occurs. Daniel is completely torn up about it.

“And did you? Send her up?” Will prompts.

“Um…she was going through Constanzia’s desk and she was going to write about me and you…”

“Did you send her up to Hannibal?” Will says more insistently this time.

“Yeah…” Daniel breathes and swallows down a lump of rock, “I did.” He chokes out the words.

Will slaps him on the shoulder and grins wickedly. “You sent Freddie Lounds to Hannibal.”

“Will…”

“Did he leave a mess?” Will asks biting his lip.

“No, I called and…nothing.”

“Then what…are you worried about?”

Daniel slumps back in his chair and watches Will’s shoulders tremble and then the laughter comes, rich and deep. He looks into Daniel’s face and breaks into another helpless gale. Daniel wipes at his eyes and begins to chuckle. Either he is picking up the vibes from Will or he has completely lost it. Either way, they are both mad. And the rabbit hole just keeps getting deeper and deeper.

Du Maurier sits on her pretty floral couch delivered yesterday. She had decided that the color of the new rug, a deep tulip pink, no white this time, did not match the living room suite and had ordered an entirely new color ensemble. At least for the few days or week that she is here, she will enjoy her living room without seeing or thinking she smells Clayton's vomit.

As she lifts the wine glass to her lips she gazes at the half empty bottle of Fiore's finest Sauvignon Blanc and tries to remember if she placed another in the fridge to chill. The commercial break has run and the flat screen is instantly filled with the image of a male corpse hanging from a tree trunk, his body pierced with arrows and his face blurred out. And beneath the arrow riddled corpse lays none other than Will Graham, his face is also blurred, but Du Maurier recognizes the scar along his belly and she recognizes Hannibal's handiwork. Graham's nude form is displayed on Italian tv midafternoon like a contorted fountain statue, his body stretched taut along the ground and chained to what appear to be stakes.

And he is alive.

The glass hangs in the air midway to her mouth, and she is unable to even take a sip to calm herself. The afternoon news anchor begins her story about the tragedy in the Boboli Gardens this morning. Du Maurier listens and gathers that at some point before she arrived, Hannibal and Graham had murdered a Policia detective, unnamed, who had likely followed Graham to Hannibal's villa. They had decided to eat dinner before trussing him up like Saint Sebastian. When she made a sleeping beauty of Graham, Hannibal must have decided to include him in his murder tableau.

Hannibal has given his beloved a most sensational alibi. Her fingers clench the glass so tightly she almost breaks it. With trembling hand she lifts it to her lips and drinks deeply. Hannibal has cost her enough stemware already.

She sinks back into the plush cushions and eyes the bottle, thinking she could drink more easily if she simply abandoned the glass. She is alone after all. As she leans forward to grasp the slender neck of the bottle she shudders. Hannibal left her GPS with his tableau. The tableau was discovered right after dawn by the FBI. The gardens weren't even open yet.

Their game of chess has become increasingly more challenging. She supposes that is unavoidable given the stakes are so high. Graham can't have remembered much and Du Maurier smiles as she imagines the mood he must have awakened with this morning. It's all fun and games until someone winds up naked in a murder tableau.

She has no choice but to talk to Crawford. She will have to find a way to convince him that Hannibal discovered her ruse, tried to protect Graham, and that she is in fear of her life. That is not really far from the truth. If Crawford can just get her out of Florence, unseen, she can find a way to Zurich on her own. Du Maurier brings the bottle to her lips and is sent out of her cushion by the sound of her door bell.

Her eyes narrow as she thinks Hannibal has some nerve showing up here. She smooths her dress and arranges her bra so the cleavage appears just so, and walks to the door, her expression a frozen mask of congeniality.

As she opens the door, wine glass full and in her hand again, her face unfreezes and melts into confusion at the sight of the bright red head of long spiral curls and ruby lipstick. She quickly adjusts her expression and waits for the woman to identify herself.

“Hello.” The young woman, who looks vaguely familiar, takes a step closer almost crossing the threshold. “You’re Francesca Dumont?”

“Yes…and who are you?”

“My name is Freddie Lounds. I’m working on a story for Tattle Crime, perhaps you’ve heard of it?”

“I have.” Du Maurier’s head spins with headlines from Baltimore. This is the reporter Graham pretended to kill to snare Hannibal. Several scenarios present themselves. Du Maurier considers the most effective means of ridding herself of the parasite at her door. Denial first.

“Well, for starters, I think we have something in common.”

“Really. And what would that be?”

“Jack Crawford.”

“Jack Crawford. I’m not familiar with the name. You must have me confused with someone else.” Du Maurier begins to close the door.

Lounds places her foot at the door jamb. “Maybe I do have you confused. I could swear your name is Bedelia Du Maurier.”

Du Maurier holds the door open and stands to one side. The most effective means of ridding herself of this parasite is located in the kitchen. First, Miss Lounds will have to divulge her source, willingly or not.

“I stand corrected.” Du Maurier says, a very slight smile gracing her lips. “Won’t you come in? I was just opening another bottle of wine, made right here.”

“You agree to talk to me?”

“Apparently, it is in my best interest to accommodate you. How else can I affect damage control?”

“All right, then. What are we drinking?”

“A Sauvignon blanc, a crisp aged wine, not for the casual wine drinker.”

“Well, I’ll do my best not to wince.” Lounds says, settling into a plush cushion on the couch. “Watching the news, huh?”

“Better to watch the news than to be the news.” Du Maurier says. “The wine is in the fridge. Glasses are in the hutch.”

Du Maurier waits until Lounds is occupied admiring the crystal and selecting a glass before retreating into the kitchen. She pulls out the chilled bottle from the fridge and opens the drawer for the wine key and the syringes.

Better the devil you know. And Du Maurier knows the devil very well.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for taking so long between chapters. The emotional deluge building to this season's finale was exhausting! A very heartfelt thank you to everyone who has been reading. Long live Hannibal and Will!

Will and Daniel are referring to the Iliad, Chapter XVI.

Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

> Alia visits Will and Daniel at Ospidali di Careggi. Hannibal confers with Roberta and recalls an evening with Will. Jack handles Will and Mason. Mason reaches out to Pazzi. Will and Daniel return to Fiesole for a quiet evening but Hannibal has other plans.
>
> Will had stepped out of the heap of clothes and inclined his head to nuzzle back, scraping whiskers deliciously rough across Hannibal's cheek, nose brushing his collar. He had felt a fumbling of fingers at his throat as Will had loosened his tie, slipped it from around his neck and let it drop to the carpet a crumple of silk that he shoved aside with his foot to join the rumpled pile. Hannibal's ensuing frown had only encouraged him and he had plucked at buttons next. Hannibal had allowed him to unfasten all of them waiting until his shirt had hung loosely from his shoulders before grabbing his wrists and pressing thumbs into flesh.
>
> Not…the shirt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 76

Alia visits Will and Daniel at Ospidali di Careggi. Hannibal confers with Roberta and recalls an evening with Will. Jack handles Will and Mason. Mason reaches out to Pazzi. Will and Daniel return to Fiesole for a quiet evening but Hannibal has other plans.

Angelo Ferito, Roberto Ferri

The Devil pulls the strings which make us dance;

We find delight in the most loathsome things;

Some furtherance of Hell each new day brings,

And yet we feel no horror in that rank advance.

Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

Will leans forward pulling the IV with him, he winces with the prick of discomfort and sighs impatiently as he gives it a tug so he can move. He needs to stretch his back, make room for the glossing of feathers erupting from beneath tender skin. He rubs his eyes with his free hand and reaches for Daniel with the other. As his fingers grasp Daniel's hand he feels the reassuring grip of Daniel's fingers in return and he knows Daniel understands the outburst of a moment ago. After Daniel's morning, a little laughter probably made him feel better too. Humor remains one of the more effective coping mechanisms available to him in his dark universe.

Will has been surrounded by people since he awakened from his drug induced stupor on the ground, unable to retreat into the sanctuary of his mind to sort and process the impressions and associations percolating, dripping in a constant stream but just out of reach. He'd had to focus on the crime scene and what was being said to him, around him, the demands on his attention had drained him as he had attempted to keep the barrage of images and conversation assaulting his senses to a minimum without the benefit of solitude.

The superb irony of Lounds wandering right into Hannibal's path had simply been the icing on a tall layered cake already crumbling under its own weight. And Will doesn't particularly like cake.

The weight on his shoulders has been lifted somewhat, the laughter releasing some of the tightly twisted tension in muscles still aching from the unnatural position of his limbs for so long. The heft of his winged form has followed him from his inferno and it hangs heavily, he feels the razor wisp of the tines as they protrude along his spine even as he stretches across the mattress and pillows of his hospital bed.

The news of Freddie Lounds is not insignificant, nor is Will without compassion for the intrepid albeit irritating journalist, but when compared to the other events accosting Will over the last twenty four hours, her demise does not resonate with quite the same vibration. Lounds feels off key, a discordant note in an otherwise tuneful symphony.

This time yesterday, he was trapesing up hills in Impruneta on his way to Hannibal's villa. Since then he has abetted the murder of a police detective, dined on Lucia Paolini, and succumbed to mind altering drugs, almost shooting Du Maurier only to end up a part of Hannibal's murder tableau.

Those courses seeming served in quick succession had been quickly followed up with a palate cleansing served by Jack and the FBI and all the while sprinkled with hallucinations. Rinaldo Pazzi is strategizing at this very moment how to snatch him up for Mason. So, if Hannibal thinks to pluck a sour note with Freddie Lounds, good for him. Although where he'd prepare the slim and delicate meat is a mystery. Then again, Lomo Saltado doesn't take that long to make; it's basically just a stir fry.

Although the moment of dark humor had snapped the spring inside, the binding apprehension still spirals around his throat like a noose. He thinks of the snare he intends to tighten around Hannibal's neck, a snare Hannibal is aware of but evidently confident Will's true instincts will prevail. Will knows this showdown with Mason the ultimate test of his resolve and Hannibal sees it as the ultimate opportunity to demonstrate he knows Will better than Will knows himself.

Will's fear is that Hannibal is right.

Although Daniel had commiserated with him, identified with his feelings, Will knows he is upset and likely confused at his response to Will's black humor. Daniel's universe is not quite so dark. Daniel may understand it, may have empathized with him, but his own feelings must be odds with Will's feelings. At least Will hopes that is the case.

The idea was to keep you out of my universe, but…it hasn't worked out that way.

In for a penny, in for a pound…

Daniel is beginning to understand how literally his words might be taken. As Will looks into the somber eyes staring back at him, he imagines the tortured soul twisting behind the field of green.

"In for your penny, in for your pound." Will says. "Feeling a bit like Bassanio to Hannibal's Shylock?"

"There is no answer to excuse the current of our cruelty." Daniel looks down at Will's fingers wrapped around his wrist. "It is becoming easier to play God, isn't it? Compared to Ruggerio…"

Daniel looks up from the entwined fingers and gives Will one of his lop-sided smiles. He knows Will let loose like he had because of the trust they share. He felt the tension ease like a deflated balloon just like Will had.

“There’s that, but there’s an odd sort of symmetry to it. He shouldn’t have made you party to it.”

“An almost fated convergence of circumstance. I keep replaying my conversation with her and I am appalled at my actions. My fear dictated everything. And I rationalized sending her up with a dose of self-righteous anger for her behavior as if the punishment fit the crime.”

“You’re wishing you’d had the stones to warn her.”

“Um, yeah. Basically. Will, I just played along. I am complicit in murder.”

Will sighs deeply as he thinks how he has already been down this road. Leave it to Hannibal to take the ugly road Will has put Daniel on even further. Hannibal had taken the opportunity to make that triangle he proposed to Daniel seem all the more attainable, and alluring. Typically and compulsively curious about what Daniel would do, what sort of stuff he is made of; Hannibal had presented him with a moral dilemma. Never mind that Hannibal had also essentially alluded to the impermanence of that triangle by introducing Hector into their private universe.

Daniel had been slammed with coded imagery and behaviorism from the preeminent intelligent psychopath. To even utter the word *run* to Lounds would have felt like a betrayal of the intimacy he had just shared with Hannibal. Will understands that sense of betrayal all too well.

“You were presented with an unfair moral choice intended to elicit a decision based on emotion not reason. Did you consider the consequences of your actions at the time, or did you just react?”

“Mostly react. Pissing him off was not an option. My only thought of consequences was the article she threatened to write. I was…angry.”

Daniel remembers his head had still been spinning from the shared kiss, tossed about in Hannibal’s raw emotional tide and how the sight of Lounds going through Constanzia’s desk had aroused such perfect indignation. He’d been emotionally overwhelmed, the anticipation of regret a remote ember smoldering in his chest. Even sitting here now with Will talking about it feels dream-like, surreal. He imagines the valium has dampened his mind somewhat and accounts for the fog he moves through this morning. The drugs have not affected his conscience however, and he now has a very visceral sense of what Will carries around all the time.

“And you clung to that anger to get you through it.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” Daniel says clearly unhappy with himself.

“Your conversation with Hannibal had convinced you that you had no choice. The beauty of his influence lies in the power of suggestion. As you said, the devil is not as black as he is painted. He knows you want to protect me.”

“Everything I said and did provided him with insight.”

Will nods holding Daniel’s gaze, “If you play with the devil, you will have to pay him at some point. Lounds…has been playing and living on borrowed time. But she didn’t know he was there. Did she know you were there?”

“I don’t see how. I don’t know who tipped her off to our association.” Daniel wags his finger between the two of them, “Maybe she’s been watching FBI headquarters at Piazza Repubblica.”

“You’ve only been there once. I’ve only been there a couple times. If she spotted you yesterday and realized you weren’t me she probably assumes she has been seeing you all week. Which means she would have accosted you yesterday, when you left Jack. No…someone tipped her off at the crime scene this morning and she pounced on it. You would have found her prowling around your property if she had known yesterday.”

“FBI or Polizia?”

“I don’t think FBI. And if it was Policia Pazzi is the only one who benefits from the leak. He wanted the Paolini to broaden the scope of their net for me to include you.”

Will considers how Hannibal might have handled Lounds. Hannibal would have assumed the same as Will. In order to keep Daniel out of any investigation into her death, she couldn’t be found anywhere near his office. Will thinks Hannibal might be tempted to deposit her on Pazzi’s doorstep, missing her offending tongue. Lounds’ tongue is at least as feisty as Frederick’s.

“You said you checked her website this morning?” Will asks.

“At my office. Posted pictures of you, Ruggerio had been blacked out for the most part, the article was written with her usual hyperbole and sensationalism.”

“Did she mention that I was injured, or going to the hospital?”

“She indicated more updates would be forthcoming on location at Ospidale di Careggi. Shit. She gave your location away to the Paolini.”

Daniel rises from the chair and presses his face to the glass of the window. Will’s room is not at the front of the hospital, but the street and courtyard below are filled with people going about their business. No crowds and no sign of the press.

“I don’t see any photographers, but then I guess they wouldn’t advertise it.”

“Neither would the Paolini. No local TV people milling about?”

“Not that I can tell. Maybe you would notice. Shit. This window doesn’t overlook the main entrance, either.”

“No point in looking out that window, or any other. I should be out of here soon anyway.”

“You can sign yourself out, but I guess you don’t want to do that?”

“Jack asked me expressly not to. I appear more cooperative and receptive to his authority if I behave at the hospital. Which…actually helps my position.”

“And his position. If Jack is turning his head the other way.”

“It’s not a matter of if he’s turning his head; it’s a matter of degrees. Jack wants Hannibal and trust has become a casualty in the pursuit, he’ll live with the regret if I don’t survive.”

“If you do as he says, he’ll be more likely to call in the cavalry. If you go off on your own again, he won’t authorize back up.”

“He can’t. That would suggest he knew ahead of time what I was planning. Knew what Pazzi was planning. He can’t tell Interpol either. But they are watching Pazzi, too. Unless Jack is working with Interpol to expose Pazzi.”

“You think the security detail will be Policia, then.”

“Absolutely. Handpicked by Pazzi.”

“And if Pazzi has convinced Interpol that the FBI is reckless?” Daniel offers.

“A possibility, but Interpol was at the crime scene this morning. Inspector Santo is not pleased with Pazzi’s handling of Ruggerio and he is not impressed with Jack, either. Kade Purnell has been talking to him. Both Jack and Pazzi are dancing around Interpol.”

“It’s still a waiting game. Despite all the evidence, Hannibal is still leading everyone around.”

“They have scraps of evidence that amount to nothing. Jack knows that if Hannibal really wanted to flee Florence he would already be gone. He’d have to leave by unconventional means, but people avoid airports and train stations all the time. Jack can let Policia manage the manhunt and secure the borders without using his own resources. Ruggerio’s murder ensures that.”

“The tableau left no doubt why Hannibal remains in Florence, Will.”

Daniel’s brows knit an apology and Will acknowledges the sentiment with a grimace and a nod. In case there had been any doubt, Hannibal had effectively removed it. There was also the added bonus of further alienating Will, isolating him and marking him for exclusion. While Hannibal revels in the attention this latest tableau affords him, he knows it is Will’s nature to retreat from attention.

“If Jack were smart, he would arrange for my escort out of the country. Hannibal would follow. Jack doesn’t know that for sure, but I do. If Mason doesn’t make a move soon, Jack may do exactly that.”

Daniel sighs from the window, fingers pressing against the panes to fan out wide, splayed flat. His thoughts are fixed again upon Lounds and where Hannibal is at this moment. He and Will must have made some plans over their reunion dinner. Another thought occurs and he turns abruptly from the window.

“You don’t think Policia or FBI would go through my house, do you?”

“If I lived alone, Jack might, but they can’t invade your home without a warrant. Even after Tier and Mason in Baltimore, Jack didn’t send anyone to my place. Inadmissible evidence. He could only use whatever he found at your place to entrap or extrapolate, attempt to anticipate the next move. He won’t risk losing evidence or undermining the existing working relationship we have. He can’t be sure there is anything incriminating at your house. I mean, he figures I either wouldn’t leave evidence or involve you anyway.”

“Well, he’d be figuring wrong, wouldn’t he?” Daniel scoffs, points a finger at Will. “He knew you killed Tier and he knew Mason was lying. He’s not so sure about Ruggerio.”

“But he is sure I didn’t kill him at your house.” Will points out.

“He’s rethinking Lucia and Luciano. He’s talked to Du Maurier. Jack understands sins of omission. Especially from you. All of you converse in this code…” Daniel pauses, frustrated, mouth trying to coordinate with his brain but the right words won’t come. Exasperated he says, “Because lying is second nature to all of you, you leave these deep pockets of contradictions. And then you all whine about the lack of honesty.”

Will shrugs in agreement but looks aside to avoid the large green eyes scolding him. The reproach is warranted, but Daniel should recognize the tools of manipulation when he sees them. He uses them every day in his profession. Isn’t all psychiatry manipulation?

“Honesty is a weapon best used sparingly in Hannibal’s universe. It is a blade often turned upon the one who wields it.” Will says simply.

“No relationship can survive a bed of lies, Will. Is that really the bed you want to sleep in? Believe me; I peel back the sheets all the time on the bed we sleep in.”

The words hurt and Will hangs his head. “I know how fortunate I am that you remain in the bed, Daniel.”

Daniel feels the contrition from Will, the pained expression on his face and the tousled curls brushing his arm recalls the anguished haunted visage lying beside him in the dim light of their hotel room at Podere Violino when Daniel had caressed the scar across Will’s stomach that first wondrous encounter. Will flinches still as though the wound is still fresh, still tender and Daniel feels the twinge each time. He supposes that tenderness will remain. Will won’t let it heal.

There is another emotion threading through the tapestry of Will’s being and Daniel feels it like distressed fibers pulled taut within and he can guess the source of Will’s fear as he lays on his pillow staring up at images only he can see. The imminent encounter with Verger and the Paolini looms on the horizon and Daniel considers that Will does not have much to look forward to when and if Hannibal is caught. He faces criminal charges himself, at least a couple years of legal hassles and possible incarceration. He can’t really ever go home.

Daniel knows what it is to contemplate ending your life, to dread living another day feeling an empty vessel full of holes unable to retain even a drop of happiness. Will wants what he has told himself he cannot have. But he will never be happy unless he has what he wants. Daniel imagines Will’s fear has him tied in knots. Afraid he might fail and afraid he might actually succeed.

Daniel wishes he could be that happiness for Will, but he too wants what he cannot have. Hannibal may end up getting what he wants, but he will have broken Will to have it, and if Will has his way, Hannibal will not hold him for long.

“God but you are infuriating.” Daniel smooths his thumb over Will’s tense knuckles, knowing Will draws some comfort from his touch, from his mist of ocean that descends when they are close.

“Any more progress on Lucia and Luciano?”

The pale blue eyes shine with the familiar gratitude as Will looks up at him and Daniel marvels this is the same strange patient who forced himself to keep his appointment with him merely a few weeks ago. He feels he has lived a lifetime with Will since then.

Will allows himself a moment to wrap himself in the gentle mist that surrounds him and calms him. Despite everything, Daniel remains his anchor no matter how turbulent his sea becomes. He places his free hand over the fingers entwined in his, punctuating the message already sent and received by the look on Daniel's face.

"You mean FBI progress?" Will offers a quick smile, "Price and Zeller have mapped out characters from Rodin's *Gates of Hell* and matched them to Hannibal's associations in Baltimore. People already dead. They were working on matching them to other people with connections to Hannibal. Price seems to think the sides of the cube point to possible victims."

"And Jack is letting him run with it."

"He's got nothing else. He has to appear productive. He's not sold on my interpretation but I'm not exactly the lead Jack wants to offer Purnell."

"And he's got Du Maurier."

"What he's got is his GPS tracker back and he knows he won't get a second chance to use that ruse again."

Daniel supposes not. He would love to ask Will about dessert with the duplicitous Du Maurier but that will have to wait. The Polizia officer at the door cannot hear them, whispered English is likely very difficult to follow, but this is not the place to discuss the actual words exchanged between Will, Hannibal, and Du Maurier.

"Hannibal knows all the tricks, doesn't he?"

"Not all. Hannibal is aware of FBI technology but he avoids technology himself. There are no trails other than the ones he fabricates."

"Jack should have asked more questions while he was here with you."

"Asking me questions invites questions from me Jack is disinclined to answer. He asked me what he needed to at the crime scene. He keeps tabs on Pazzi, but doesn't ask him anything directly either. Jack knows I'm aware and I will take steps to protect myself. There won't be anything leading back to Jack."

"Will? What do you think Hannibal did with Lounds?"

"She sure has a talent for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, doesn't she?"

"Yeah. I mean what are the chances of crossing paths with him, here? Talk about cosmic irony."

Thoughts of what exactly Hannibal did with Lounds have been twining around Will's skull since Daniel mentioned the events of this morning. Her interruption of Hannibal's *session* with Daniel constitutes perhaps a convenient convergence of circumstance for Hannibal.

Will thinks again of that early morning when Hannibal had showed up at his home in Wolf Trap, art case and drawing pads tucked under his arm, prepared to draw the scene Will had mentioned the day before. They had lugged Hannibal's art supplies and his fishing caddy, heavy with tackle back to the house after their sojourn in the woods feeling peckish as Hannibal had put it. Will had watched as Hannibal had walked around his kitchen to settle finally in front of his refrigerator.

May I? Hannibal had said, pulling the door open, head already inside the opened fridge, the dark eyes taking a quick inventory.

Help yourself, not much in there…

On the contrary, you keep all the essentials. If one didn't know you, it would be easy to make the assumption you exist on pre-packaged entrees. Your palate is more refined than you lead people to believe.

Hannibal had looked up from the fridge brow raised provocatively his smooth face aglow in the light of the single appliance bulb beaming from the fridge. Will had crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the middle island counter, amused and wondering what Hannibal was thinking on doing with his essentials.

I'll bite. Tell me what you infer from my fridge.

Hannibal had closed the door to the fridge and opened the freezer on top, lips barely keeping from breaking into a smile.

Meticulously wrapped fish and meat. Fresh caught?

Will had nodded.

The meat…venison?

Will had nodded again.

Buck or doe?

Doe. I took her out down by the stream. She…was wounded. Hit by a car or attacked.

Efficient and merciful. You tracked her?

Saw her limping while I was out with the dogs. Went back to the house. Got my hunting rifle. I knew a wolf would eventually get her. Sat on the porch until she came out again to forage. Followed her to the stream.

A convergence of circumstances your freezer is full. You thought to spare her a grisly fate.

I thought about finding her torn apart, the carcass exposed for days.

You deplored the waste.

I took the cuts I wanted; carried the remains into the deep woods and left them there. Wolves gotta eat, too.

Yes, they do. Wolves are pack animals. They hunt together.

Hannibal had glanced at the dogs lazing about the fireplace intently watching the two men in the kitchen circling each other.

They also hunt alone. Will had said.

When necessary. A wolf recognizes a fellow wolf when he sees one.

Two wolves don't make a pack.

They can. Tell me, your rifle…not semi-automatic, is it?

No, bolt. Ruger M77, if that means anything to you.

It does. Recoil is diminished with an automatic weapon, yet you prefer the bolt.

I prefer the control. Once you know what the recoil feels like, you adjust for it, get used to it.

Like the rifle is an extension of your body. You like the physicality; thought becomes action.

As you said, it's efficient.

Did you empathize with the deer when you shot her? Imagined her blind terror at being ripped apart by a wolf as you looked through the scope?

She was in pain, aware she was injured almost toppling into the stream to drink. My decision to end her suffering.

A compassionate killer, our lone wolf…

Hannibal had commenced rummaging around his fridge, selecting mushrooms, onions and carrots and a bag of cubed venison, already thawed. Will had pointed out where various items were kept in the cabinets, spices, flour, olive oil… For the next three quarters of an hour he had watched Hannibal make himself at home in his kitchen, sleeves rolled up, the scent of caramelized onions and savory meat hanging in the air. Within the hour, he and Hannibal had sat down to a simple but delicious meal of Cajun inspired stew over rice courtesy the compassionate killer.

Hannibal had never asked if there had been other meat available though he knew Will kept a large freezer in his barn and knew very well what was in it, or rather he had assumed what had been in it. Instead, he had made a point of using only what was readily available and as Will thinks back on that day, Hannibal's gesture of making lunch in his home had been alluding to an overture of compromise. The wolf and rifle metaphors easy enough to interpret, but he had also wanted Will to understand that within their pack of two, he was willing to make concessions. A life is made of moments and Hannibal had not wasted a moment spent with him, each and every encounter imbued with embedded messages of his becoming yes, but there had also been subtle acts of affection and veiled demonstrations of domesticity.

A convergence of circumstance. The unfortunate doe might have wandered for days before succumbing to her injuries or a predator, but she had wandered into Will's yard prompting a different end for her. Lounds' visit was not a planned event, either. The little ginger doe had not expected to run into the wolf. How had the wolf turned circumstance to his advantage?

Daniel paces the length of the bed, marveling at the kind of mind it takes to navigate this immense chess board, to see all the different perspectives at once. This is Will's mindset all the time. He absorbs everything. Daniel needs to get him out of here before the Paolini have a crack at him. Will needs to go home, play with the dogs, eat something and relax as alone as possible. They both do.

“I’m going to ask at the desk when they expect to release you. Are you’re sure Jack isn’t expecting you to take off? Sounds to me like he said as much when he left.”

“He did say when they sign off on me. But, go ahead and ask, tell them I want to talk to the doctor in charge. See what they say.”

Daniel nods in agreement and as he rounds the corner of curtains he freezes. Will starts from the bed, but Daniel shakes his head, raises his index finger to wait.

“Is he decent?” Alia’s voice rings from the doorway and Will relaxes back into pillows bites at his lower lip and looks woefully at Daniel before staring out the window.

“Hello, Daniel.” Alia tries on a smile. “I was hoping to catch you before you leave. Desk says he’s about to be released.”

Daniel takes in the outfit. Alia is wearing her work clothes, pressed celery colored slacks, belt, and nondescript beige blouse. No pumps or sandals today, Alia wears low heeled loafers. Her lightweight jacket is opened to reveal her sidearm. She holds a small vase of seasonal fresh cut flowers Daniel finds poignantly incongruous.

“Oh, I was just about to ask someone. Good to see you, Alia. I’m…so sorry about Angelo. Alonso must be a wreck.”

“He…might call you. He didn’t know you were treating Will until today.”

Daniel remains where he is. He makes no move to embrace her where she stands though the look in her eyes is inviting and Daniel senses the longing to be touched, held, and comforted. She vacillates, caught between conflicting loyalties. Well, aren’t they all?

“They were very close. Of course I’ll talk to him.” Daniel says.

His words prompt a fresh wave of pain from Alia and Daniel feels his own face tighten as Alia struggles to contain the remorse that swells deep in her chest. Alia’s dark brown eyes flash beneath the luxuriant lashes, her pretty face wrinkles for a moment and she takes a breath as shoulders slump slightly in resignation. She wears no makeup as usual, but it is clear to Daniel she had been crying earlier. The eyelids are puffy and edged with pink, and tip of her nose as well, evidence of too many rough tissues dabbing at tender skin.

Alia shakes off the itchiness at her nose and the sting in her eyes. She knows she can’t ask either of them any direct questions about Ruggerio and Daniel’s reluctance to approach her, to close the distance between them hurts. She expects Will to behave the same way. A part of her knows she will never have another day like the afternoon at the Uffizi with them again.

“I hadn’t left my house when I got the call. Drove right over to Alonso’s place. We cried all the way to his mother’s house. *Benedetto Dio!* She was a wreck. Threw herself on the floor…” Alia stops and crosses herself, remembering Will is right on the other side of the curtain. He didn’t need to hear that.

She peeks around the corner as Daniel moves aside for her. “Hi, Will. I’m…*è una cagata!* This is so awkward.”

Alia blinks and takes a breath. The Will in the hospital bed looks so different from the one she knows. He seems fragile somehow. Hospitals have a way of making a person look especially helpless, but seeing him hooked up to the IV and the monitors is jarring. She cannot imagine how she would cope with what Will has been through this morning.

Alia presents the vase full of flowers, clearly just purchased from downstairs, but an expressive gesture nonetheless and none of the emotion behind it lost on Will. The creature slithers inside, a slimy wet thing crawling around his entrails and Will resists the urge to glance down just to make sure his flesh isn't really moving beneath the sheet. As he looks at Alia warm and fragrant and alive he thinks how easily it could have been her and not Ruggerio in the tableau.

And if I'd sent D'Angelo instead of Ruggerio?

Plenty of female saints, aren't there?

"Everyone is sick about Ruggerio, and there are some bad feelings going around, but there are a lot of us who are glad it wasn't a double murder. I didn't know what to bring…"

Daniel takes the vase from her hands and sets it on the window ledge mentally preparing for the emotional avalanche he knows is coming. Alia is here as a bereaved friend, but underneath her jacket is the other reason she is here. Daniel wonders if she came on her own, or if she was sent here. He supposes Will is wondering the same thing. He can see her sidearm as well as he can.

"You brought yourself in here." Will says adjusting the pillow so he can sit up straight instead of lying prone like an invalid. "That says a lot. Leaving Ruggerio's mother must have been… difficult."

"I stayed until some more family showed up. I was there when Pazzi and the brass arrived. Alonso and his mother had lots of questions but there weren't many answers." She flicks her hair from her eyes, smooths it back and stares expectantly into Will's face.

"So you came here for some answers?"

"Among other things." Alia touches Will's toes beneath the blankets until they wriggle and Will gives her the smile she wants, uneasy though it is. "You woke up in Boboli? Lecter drugged you?"

"I had no idea where I was until they told me."

"And you were surprised to see Ruggerio, too?"

"Jack didn't tell me anything when I woke up, let me turn my head and see for myself. I realized then whose…organs were on top of me."

As Will skirts his lies the split along his back and shoulders deepens and the wings emerge to fan out behind him, shadows shunting across the sheets to fall on Alia's face. Daniel stands by the window, arms folded over his chest lips drawn tight while he observes both of them.

"Pazzi pulled me aside, told me what they found out there. He explained what you said about Angelo being Saint Sebastian. You blame *Il Capo* for his death." Alia narrows her eyes, "Hannibal Lecter killed him, not my boss."

"He sent Ruggerio with specific instructions. But he sent him alone, Alia."

Will looks directly into the baleful brown eyes that grow wide as she considers the implications and she blinks as though slapped. Will thinks she must have realized how lucky she is that Pazzi did not call her.

“If no one had followed me, or if Ruggerio had someone with him, he would still be alive.” Will pauses for effect, “Did Pazzi send you here?”

Alia looks to her feet. Will looks to Daniel who nods. When Alia lifts her head, her expression is hard and her lips seem to push out words that cleave to her mouth, reluctant to leave.

“He said the Paolini might come and…to let them. See what they do, but not interfere.”

Daniel looks to the ceiling as teeth grind together. Pazzi knows Alia has feelings for Will. She evidently has feelings for him as well, but Pazzi wouldn’t be privy to their exchange at the Uffizi. Expecting her to stand by and allow Will or Daniel to get abducted or injured while she has a gun is a ridiculous directive. Will knows it, too.

Pazzi’s intentions are clear and he does not care who gets hurt. If Alia were to become collateral damage like Ruggerio all the better. No one to tell tales to internal affairs.

“Did he tell you to follow them?”

“No. He said to call it in if they…got hold of you. That he would take it from there.”

“Will…we have to leave. Now.” Daniel says, tossing Will the bag from the bottom of the bed.

“For all we know, they were waiting for her to show up.” Will says, unhooking the EKG monitor which emits a high pitched whine as the monitor flat lines.

“Well, that will get the nurse in here.” Daniel nods at the machine.

“What are you talking about? You think Pazzi is using me to signal the Paolini? Why would he do that?” Alia looks from one to the other, thoughts tumbling like rotten fruit.

“Your boss believes that I am the perfect bait and after this morning, he has no doubts about that whatsoever. Jack Crawford left here a little while ago. If the Paolini are watching the hospital, and they probably are since Tattle Crime announced which hospital I was being taken to, then they know that there is only a small Policia presence here.”

“You’d be safer in the room wouldn’t you? There’s two Policia…” Alia walks to the door.

Will watches her look up and down the hall and deduces the Policia officer who had been sitting by the door is gone. Alia draws her gun and nods to Will.

“Get dressed if that’s what you were going to do. You can’t leave like that.”

“Daniel…” Will says lifting his arm still attached to the IV.

“Got it.” Daniel says, already peeling back the tape that holds the needle in place.

Will is soon in the bathroom, door closed with the athletic bag. Daniel listens to him shuffle around, knowing Will is arming himself with knife and Berretta. He thinks briefly that the only reason Will is arming himself is because he is not alone. He also hopes that the Paolini will not accost them for the same reason.

“You saw Tattle Crime this morning?” Alia says, eyes on the door, weapon held low in front in both hands.

“Yeah. Crawford called me early to let me know they found Will…and Angelo. I saw Will’s photo spread, and I found the corresponding paintings that were um…inspiration.”

“Yeah, I saw the pictures, too. Saw the photos of Ruggerio untouched from the crime lab. If Lecter is punishing Will, why would he go after the Paolini if they did get him?”

“Because Lecter is a jealous psychopath. He won’t tolerate anyone else punishing Will.”

“You’re serious.” Alia says. “He’d risk getting caught?”

“It’s…a complicated relationship they have.” Daniel says thinking that a most egregious understatement. “Think about it. The Paolini tried to hurt Will or abduct him more likely in that alley. Lecter intervened. Left when Will was okay. His plans for Will do not include…company.” Daniel frowns at yet another understatement.

A tall dark haired doctor in a white hospital coat stalks into the room followed by a nurse, one of the nurses Daniel had seen behind the large circular desk when he got off the elevator. He glances around the room, his face a study in alarm and confusion.

“*Dove si trova il paziente? Il Signor Graham, è vero*?”

“*Bagno, vestirsi.* Alia says nodding at the closed bathroom door. “I’m Detective D’Angelo and I am here to escort Signor Graham and his *psichiatra* out.”

“I was about to discharge him, but I’ll just have him sign…” The doctor turns to the nurse who holds out a clipboard and pen. “…sign this, please. Why the hurry?” He looks down at the service weapon in Alia’s hands.

“Where is the officer posted at the door?” Alia asks.

“He stopped by the desk to ask where the bathroom was.” The nurse offers, “Was he not supposed to do that?”

“No, he wasn’t. He should have told me. Maybe it’s nothing. Where are the bathrooms?”

“Down the hall to your left about four doors. Almost to the next nurse’s station.”

Alia turns to Daniel. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere. Get him signed out or whatever.” Alia disappears around the door.

Will emerges from the bathroom, clutching the gym bag and blinking in surprise at the crowd around him. The bathroom doors are thick, but not so thick that he couldn’t hear. What had he just been thinking about as he had stood in front of the mirror…?

“Signor Graham. I’m the attending physician on this floor, Dottore Lazzari. I have your paperwork. Seems you unhooked yourself.”

"I did that." Daniel says. "Did the bleeding stop?" He turns to Will.

"Yes. No problem there."

"This is highly irregular but you were brought here under highly irregular circumstances." Lazzari manages a tight smile. "We hydrated you. Sent the blood requested by the FBI to a Jack Crawford."

"I know."

"Except for the residual effects of the drugs, and some bruising…ah not all of it from this morning," Lazzari pauses, catches the tart look from Will, "…you are clear to go. You'll be sore for a couple days. Take some over the counter medication, anti-inflammatory. Whatever won't upset your stomach and get something decent to eat. Rest."

"Sounds like solid advice. Thanks."

"Want some more advice? Find another profession. You might not be so lucky next time."

"I'm not expecting a next time." Will says as he signs his name without reading the paperwork. Standard release forms. More jumping through hoops in a world that doesn't matter anymore.

Alia returns to the room, the Polizia officer in tow. Alia rolls her eyes at Will and Daniel. "He was taking a shit. Can you believe it?" Alia throws up her hands. "*Mannaggia! Cosa stavi pensado?"*

The Polizia officer clearly was not thinking, or had figured one patient in a bed did not require two Polizia officers watching over him. The officer appears apologetic enough and Will does not believe there was any malice behind the bathroom break. The red blush around the young officer's collar as he glares at Alia is real enough. The clean shaven face turns to Will and mumbles an apology. He takes his seat by the door.

"What were your orders when Signor Graham was discharged?" Alia asks him.

"To escort him to his ride and then call in that I'm on my way back to the precinct. Done for the day, *Detective*."

"*Bene.* You have new orders now. You stay put until I call and tell you to go. Give me your cell number." Alia presents her phone so he can punch in the numbers.

"And if I get a call?"

"Tell them what I told you. What would you think to tell them?" Alia says sharply.

She thinks there might be something to Will's suspicions about her boss after all. Not that she disbelieves Will; she doesn't want to believe her boss is as corrupt as the talk she's been hearing today indicates. The young officer's question reeks of someone already accustomed to covering up and he is far too young to quickly infer that Alia was asking him to do something on the sly. She wonders if the newer officers simply assume that because she works with Pazzi she is like him. The thought chills.

The young officer nods and offers a sullen smile. Alia thinks it not so long ago she was a recruit herself and she hopes this Officer Passerini is not indicative of the entire crop of next generation officers. She moves aside to stand flush with the wall in the hallway so the doctor and nurse approaching the door can brush past her, their business with Will must be finished.

"Oh, Signor Graham…" the nurse says, turning back to Will, "There is a package for you. It's at the desk, stop by on your way out and I'll get if for you if you wait."

"Sure, um…when did you receive it?"

"Not long ago. Maybe half an hour. An FBI agent dropped it off."

"Ok."

A moment later, Will is staring at a sealed package. He rips it open and lets the new sleek black phone slip into his palm as he reads the handwritten note from Jack. Will steps into the hall to find Alia leaning against the wall.

"Let's go." He touches her arm and can practically bask in the warmth that radiates in response.

"What's the note say?" Daniel asks taking up beside Alia.

"To call him when I pick it up."

"Wanted to make sure you checked out proper, huh?"

"Uncle Jack keeping tabs on his broken pony." Will manages without too much sarcasm.

"How were you planning to get home?" Alia asks.

"I drove." Daniel says. "Hospital parking lot, second level."

"I'll walk you out and then call about security arrangements. *Merda.* This is a mess. If there isn't a detail set up, I'll arrange it and call you, give you a heads up."

She moves closer to Will and stands on tip toe to whisper in his ear. "Do you have a weapon in Fiesole?"

Will nods and Alia nods back in approval.

"Thanks, Alia."

Will makes a point of brushing his knuckles over her wrist, brazenly exploiting her attachment to him with a sweep of his hand. Her eyes soften as she licks at lips that appear as supple as Will remembers. The sudden fondness is quickly followed by another ugly twinge along his stomach and he glances away. Alia's pinched face betrays the tortured turmoil he knows comes with the juggling of loyalties.

As Alia holsters her weapon she considers her options. She is tempted to follow both of them back to Fiesole. She wants her answers about Ruggerio's murder and her sense of frustration mounts with every moment they stand around this hospital room. She wants Lecter to pay for killing her partner and she does not, cannot believe Will had anything to do with it. She is beginning to think that because Will sees a psychiatrist, has been labeled unstable, the FBI and her boss have targeted him as the scapegoat for whatever goes wrong.

She looks at him wearing Daniel's clothes hefting a gym bag down the hallway and she remembers him standing in the ruins of his burned out apartment looking lost and distracted trying to piece together what had happened. She had thought him a misplaced saint, his empathy a gift from god.

She remembers him lying next to her that very hot afternoon on Daniel's couch, sweat drying on their bodies and the appreciative sweep of pale blue eyes over her naked form as she had lain breathless in his arms. Will is no saint but she still thinks him misunderstood and maligned because of his gift.

Will feels Alia's eyes on him and wonders if she has detected the Berretta tucked into the top of his trousers at his back. The weight of the cold metal is a comfort and he feels a whole lot better than he did a few minutes ago without it.

No more sacrificial lambs today.

Alia turns on her heel and makes her way down the hall, not bothering to look at Passerini again. Will looks to Daniel and gestures toward the doorway. He follows Daniel out, bringing up the rear; eyes scanning the hall and then elevator, flinching as wings flap against the elevator doors and the sound of talons scrape on the other side.

Fiesole lies due north and it will be another ten minutes before Hannibal enters the ancient Etruscan city nestled in the hills above Florence. The cooler is strapped to the bike and the knapsack bearing the essential tools he believes he will require this evening are similarly strapped to his back. He has dinner plans this evening and as he approaches the exit that leads to the Fiore Estate he wonders what Du Maurier is doing for dinner beneath the orange sun hanging in the sky.

Hannibal guides the Ducati along Via Bolognese and his heart hums in his chest with joyful abandon as the engine thrums between his legs and a sonorous melody soars through the helmet's headphones. The wound weeps not and Hannibal savors the sensations anticipating the sweetness to come. He listens to Mozart and while his *Concerto No. 3* thunders in his ears the orchestrations of carbon grow ever more harmonious, the symphony he writes with Will almost complete.

His conversation with Roberta had been brief but her tidings had drifted dulcet from her tongue, a swallow of perfect pleasure from a snifter of silken cognac. His cousin had purred into the phone, her Parisian accent punctuated with pointed playfulness.

Mon Dieu that was excruciating. Elario Paolini is a crafty old goat.

Warmed the old goat's cockles, did you?

Once he stopped braying and his cockles ceased to swell with pride. Your requests although strange will be honored. I take it you intend to allow this farce with Verger to continue to its conclusion?

Are the Paolini aware of my intentions?

Mais, oui, your intentions regarding Mason Verger are not so difficult to discern. I spoke with Margot briefly. A shrewd but damaged young woman, I liked her immediately.

As do I.

She was very helpful once she understood what I was endeavoring to do. She did express some concern about her father's will should something happen to Mason.

I imagine she expressed a lot of concern.

As I understand it, the entire estate goes to some church.

The Southern Baptist Convention I believe. Margot will not be destitute, Roberta, she will have to change her lifestyle.

I am not so sure about that. I passed Margot's concerns along to Elario. Do you know what he said?

I have no idea.

He wished Margot all the best as heiress to the Verger estate. What do you think he meant by that?

Very interesting. I will have to ask Mason to be sure, but Margot may emerge from all of this better off. All things being equal, the Paolini can be trusted to do as I have asked?

The old goat's cockles require one final caress.

Which is?

A singular conversation to corroborate your version of events.

With whom?

Your William, of course.

And how does he propose to do that?

Apparently he favors Carlo's brother, Vincenzo. Vincenzo is one of the Paolini coordinating with Mason Verger.

He will be there.

A direct link to Elario at the scene. That conversation will seal the deal.

My conditions are not final unless Elario is satisfied.

The entire arrangement is contingent upon William.

You framed the proposal as famiglia.

I did. But Elario has conflicting information. He will not be persuaded any further, Hannibal.

I understand.

The creator may know his creation intimately but by his own admission, his creation is unpredictable. Will that most beloved creation bring sorrow or joy?

Would God call him beloved if he could ever know? It is in opposition we find true friendship, is it not?

Truly Hannibal, if he was created in your image then he has more than reciprocated.

Reciprocity is the highest form of intimacy, a naked prayer for a shared existence.

Bon chance, mon cher. Until we speak again…

His cousin had left him with good news, but as usual, the devil is always in the details. Mozart's Concerto No. 21 begins, the delicate notes of the piano strike chords within as shades of another dinner reach across his consciousness, a casting of twilight upon his heart. It is a memory Hannibal finds both painful and precious for the longing it inspires, but tainted with deceit as it was, no encounter with Will was without its revelations.

You can't reduce me to a set of influences. I'm not the product of anything. I've given up good and evil for behaviorism.

Then you can't say that I'm evil.

You're destructive. Same thing?

Evil is just destructive? Storms are evil, if it's that simple. And we have fire, and then there's hail. Underwriters lump it all under acts of God. Is this meat an act of God, Will?

After washing down the bitter tasting meat of Hannibal's Lomo Saltado with plenty of Chateau Mouton Rothschild's finest Bordeaux, he and Will had retired upstairs, bringing another bottle of the heady vintage with them. They had taken off shoes and socks in between sips of ruby colored seduction.

If you've given up good and evil for behaviorism then it's possible destruction is constructive? Hannibal had said.

Hannibal had stood in front of Will already availing himself of the joy of unbuttoning Will's shirt. Of course, the hands had come up to protest even as Will had dug his bare toes into the carpet to anchor him there. Perhaps an unconscious act of behaviorism, perhaps not. As it had turned out, Hannibal had shooed the hands away with the mere lift of his brow.

You imply that the storm is neutral, an act of God. The aftermath entirely a matter of perception?

Yes.

Will had dropped his arms to his sides, eyes up intently studying his face through a storm of churning blue sea.

I suppose one would have to be particularly empathetic to appreciate the duality.

Duality is the nature of existence. Empathy is required to appreciate the duality of good and evil.

Empathy requires relinquishing control. Will had said, fingers caressing lips.

So does behaviorism.

Hannibal had eased the shirt from one shoulder and Will had turned slightly to allow him to roll the sleeve from the other. He had watched Hannibal slip the shirt onto the chair through half lidded eyes and had gazed down at the fingers loosening first the leather belt, and then unhooking the clasp of his brushed cotton trousers. Hannibal had paused then, enjoying the soft gasp as he had taken the zipper down slowly.

Relinquishing control to someone you trust can be liberating.

Will had lifted his eyes in a blaze of blue or perhaps Hannibal had only seen the reflection of the flames from the fireplace burning there. Curiosity had flickered beneath the fluttering lashes despite the words that had fallen flat from the downturned mouth.

I don't trust you.

His lips had broadened into a wicked line. Hannibal had pressed his thumb along the length of stiffening cock protruding from the fabric. Trust had apparently not been an issue.

Nor I, you. Not yet. Even so, here we are.

Yes, here we are.

Hannibal had teased the trousers from waist to slender hips taking boxers along for the ride and shoving the fabric lower still until Will had stood before him beautiful and nude in the glow of the fire, his shirt and trousers at his feet. Hannibal had watched the shadows flicker across arched brow and smooth skin and the cub had lifted his chin, baring his throat. Hannibal's nose had grazed along his collarbone following the contour of bone and muscle upward; inhaling the scent of him as he would breathe in the bouquet of the Bordeaux from the crystal glass left half full on the table behind him.

Will had stepped out of the heap of clothes and inclined his head to nuzzle back, scraping whiskers deliciously rough across Hannibal's cheek, nose brushing his collar. He had felt a fumbling of fingers at his throat as Will had loosened his tie, slipped it from around his neck and let it drop to the carpet a crumple of silk that he shoved aside with his foot to join the rumpled pile. Hannibal's ensuing frown had only encouraged him and he had plucked at buttons next. Hannibal had allowed him to unfasten all of them waiting until his shirt had hung loosely from his shoulders before grabbing his wrists and pressing thumbs into flesh.

Not…the shirt.

The challenge Hannibal had come to expect and adore had flared in pale blue eyes and Hannibal had but to utter a single syllable to summon the petulant puckering of lips he also adored.

Bed.

Say please.

The pucker had softened into a grin, and toes had dipped into the pile of clothes to fling the silk tie even further across the rug.

I would not solicit what you intend to give regardless.

Still smiling, a toss of tangled curls and the crush of fingers into fists had followed. The cub's eyes had flickered but Hannibal's hold on his wrists had remained, he had in fact pressed more furtively, applying enough pressure to cause Will to wince. Not enough however to relent.

You think I intend to give control to you?

Hannibal had guided him backward to the edge of the bed, wrists still in caught in Hannibal's vice, elbows bent behind his back. Sinking slowly to the mattress he had raised his arms, the strength surprisingly sufficient to grab the collar of Hannibal's shirt. They had struggled for a moment, testing one another, measuring the effects of the wine they had both imbibed whilst trading barbs across the dining room table. Squeezing the sensitive tendons still caught in his grip, Hannibal had bestowed yet another barb.

Haven't you already?

Stubborn to the last, Will had clenched the stiff fabric of his collar and had pulled Hannibal down on top. Releasing Will's wrists from his grasp he had allowed Will to haul him across the length of the bed by his collar, Hannibal crawling along on hands and knees until Will's head had tapped the polished wood behind him. Exactly where Hannibal had desired him to be.

Hannibal's fingers had barely twined around silken strands of thick curls when Will had placed his finger just beneath Hannibal's navel and had taken it down to his buckle to curl suggestively beneath the waistband giving the trousers a spirited tug. Easing down into the satin to lay beside him, luxuriating in the sensation of cool sheets and warm skin, he had propped himself on one elbow to gaze into Will's upturned and expectant face.

Unsuspecting and pleased with himself, Will had stretched out his arms along the length of the headboard and Hannibal had quickly pulled a leather restraint from between mattress and headboard and secured it around a wrist still smarting. He had barely the time to raise a provocative brow at Will's chagrined expression before Will's other hand had whipped around from the other side of the bed to grasp Hannibal's hand.

I think not. Will had said laughing. *When did you attach these?*

Recently. Aren't you curious? Hannibal had said while admiring Will's twisted pose upon the bed.

Not in the least.

Don't be so quick to decline.

You didn't…with Alana…? The name had been crisply spoken, Will already distancing himself from the thoughts and images evoked by the slim leather about his wrist.

No. Should I?

After our meeting with Jack? Will had chuckled dismissively still trying to remove Hannibal's hand so he could unfasten the strap.

The restraints are for you. I thought I might introduce an alternative…

Will had grumbled under his breath, the words indistinct but likely vulgar had come tumbling in an exasperated rumbling from deep in his throat and he had rolled his eyes to the ceiling tugging impatiently against the leather.

Let go of my hand and I'll release you. Get dressed and go home to your dogs and your dreams.

Another slew of crude euphemisms had followed. *You're…dismissing me?*

You are dismissing yourself.

Hannibal had slid his hand out from under Will's letting go of Will's wrist and had sat up, a clear invitation for Will to unfasten the strap of leather…and leave.

We can talk again at your session tomorrow…at my office.

Slender fingers had played about the strap as Will had considered his options, chewing on his lower lip in that maddeningly sensual way that never failed to pluck a note of affection. He had tugged again at the leather restraint familiarizing himself with it, the tactile sensations stimulating more thoughts and associations.

They'll leave marks no matter how soft they are.

They are quite pliant and intended to function as a reminder. Ligature marks would be commensurate with the degree of…reminding.

What…did you have in mind?

Constructive destruction. Relinquishing control to discover the duality of good and evil in oneself. An experiment in empathy.

Yours or mine?

Mostly yours.

Pale blue eyes had glittered up from the pillow as Will had moved to recline once again on his back stretching his free arm over his head to rest along the wood. Hannibal had smiled with approval as he had leaned over Will, aware of the narrowing of eyes and the tightening of jaws as Will had watched him secure the other strap.

Always unpredictable, Hannibal had not known until the last moment that Will would agree. Fascinating and infuriating, his Will. Hannibal now had the opportunity to watch that beautiful mind attempt to reconcile the conflicting emotions and perceptions Will wrestled with, the very obstacles to his becoming. The ones he wrestles with still, tormented in an inferno of his own creation.

I don't trust you.

Will had repeated once Hannibal had secured both wrists to his satisfaction. He had peered down into the proud countenance so like his own and had slid from the azure blue satin to stand beside the bed. He had commenced retrieving the clothes from the floor; his tie first, and had gone about folding each article as he had conversed with Will stealing glances at the beautifully splayed form lying on his bed. Their bed.

Then trust that I want you to see. Our conversations are always about discovering the truth of who you are.

Who you perceive me to be.

Well, perception is that one tool pointed at both ends. Hannibal had said, setting the folded clothes on a chair.

Hannibal had begun to undress, taking his time and taking pleasure in the way the smoldering blue eyes tracked his movements. At last he had seated himself beside Will and placed a finger to his throat, reveling in the sensation of blood coursing through the jugular smiling slightly as Will had tensed to the touching, his mind already aflame and the contact causing a fresh jolt of imagery.

Do you still fantasize about killing me?

I don't want to kill you.

His pulse had remained steady and neither did the pupils dilate. But Will had avoided his question.

Not the same thing. I don't expect you to answer unless you want to. You said can't help but empathize with the other person during sex.

Will had raised his brows, wondering what connections Hannibal was laying out for him but he had nodded in answer.

Your own experience enhanced as a result?

Another nod, more slowly this time.

And when you pleasure yourself, alone?

The luscious mouth had set into a thin line and the framed Japanese prints on the far side of the bedroom had suddenly become intensely interesting. Already retreating and they had barely begun. Hannibal had sighed patiently.

Will, you live alone. You are alone most of the time. Your imagination your only companion. You expect me to believe you don't indulge once in a while?

My personal needs…are personal. Will had continued to stare at the prints.

Do you intend to fall asleep here tonight…like this?

Will had shifted about the mattress. *You want to know what I think about during my alone time.*

Hannibal had begun to trace his fingers along the warm flesh allowing Will time to settle and accept the touching as his hand trailed lower to caress soft skin and cup the silken pouch already swelling between acquiescent thighs. Caressing had quickly turned to stroking and soon Will had become solid and hard in his hand, breath ragged with anticipation.

I want you to think about what you think about. I'm going to observe you pleasure yourself using your imagination. Your imagination will provide what your body cannot.

You're not going to…finish?

No.

Without touching myself? Will had snorted *, I can just wait until I relax.*

Hannibal had resumed his stroking eliciting another soft gasp and shudder. Will had lifted his hips and groaned with pleasure and, Hannibal had thought resignation. As Hannibal's fingers had coaxed so Will had wriggled across the satin adrift in sensation.

You've already introduced a narrative. Toes had dug into the mattress.

Have I? Death and sex are inextricably linked, schemata already present in the human condition. They certainly are in yours.

And killing? He had asked accompanied by the flexing of knuckles as they had scored across the waxed wood behind Will's wild mane of curls.

Archetypes are wedded to humanity, vulnerable to the discord society introduces, the source of conflict between self and learned expectations.

The self is the primary archetype. Will had reiterated as though Hannibal had needed reminding.

It is. According to Jung, the self is the blueprint for who we really are. Unfortunately, that blueprint is buried beneath layers of societal detritus.

Constructive destruction to get to the blueprint. This is…very intimate. Will had looked up at him wonderingly, beautiful blue eyes glistening with understanding.

Another kind of intimacy we can share, perhaps even inviting trust.

God forbid we become friendly. Will had said with pointed sarcasm.

Is that what we are doing? Hannibal had retorted.

Taking his thumb to the bulb of flesh pulsing between his fingers, he had peeled back the foreskin and had released the rod of flesh from his hand to rise up erect, a pink pillar amidst the thicket of dark curly hair, amusement tugging at his lips as Will had glanced down at himself and had closed his eyes.

The concentrating had begun in earnest then. Hannibal had sat enrapt of the writhing body before him. Will's' eyes had been tightly shut, lashes fanning out and tongue darting constantly along moistened lips as muscles tensed and twitched along his body. As the visions had rolled behind the creased lids, it had seemed Will assumed a dream-like state, and Hannibal had been convinced that he was no longer in the room with him, at least the Hannibal seated on the bed beside him was not with him.

Will had a tendency to clench the sheets during sex, kneading them between his fingers ever more furiously as the tension would mount. Unable to destroy Hannibal's satin this time, he had resorted to clawing at the headboard instead, nails scratching tiny translucent indents into the wax and wood. Hannibal thinks forensics had themselves a good time analyzing that…

Finally, on the verge of release, Will had cried out. His every breath a tremulous rasp until shaking and shuddering and with a guttural whine of relief Will had succumbed to *la petite mort,* life's essence spurting from the engorged cock teetering helplessly beneath its own weight to finally drop spent and twitching while Will's legs had drawn up in an effort to absorb the spasms.

Hannibal had been waiting with a warm washcloth and had covered the throbbing muscle applying gentle pressure he knew from experience would provide a respite from the relentless sensations. Will had looked down at him between slits, still rasping and his face wonderfully beautifully contorted in a sort of confused bliss. They had lain there like that, Hannibal holding a soft cloth between his thighs and Will content with merely breathing, arms still resting over his head, pale blue eyes fixed on Hannibal's face.

No pronouncements of insight had come from Will and Hannibal had not inquired. Never entirely comfortable with sharing his thoughts to begin with, Will had retreated into comfortable silence and Hannibal had been satisfied with the knowledge that his fledgling cub had discovered some new insight into himself. Insight that would become apparent to Hannibal in one form or another. Eventually.

Although Will had not recovered completely, Hannibal had taken his pleasure between quivering thighs, his own cock hard and ready had scraped along Will's hyper sensitive flesh, causing him to whine, the soft rasping cries in his ear like music, a scorching melody of desire and pain. The melody had continued in his mind even while Will's mouth had crushed against his own, pliant and moist as he had lain pinned beneath Hannibal, the lithe frame moving with him along the satin throbbing and alive.

Hannibal had rubbed Will raw that evening and Will had not once asked Hannibal to release him from his restraints. A vision of wrecked beauty, tears streaking down cheeks and lips, he had tasted of salt and sweat as Hannibal had devoured every part of him. He had wrapped his legs around Hannibal's slippery hips, Hannibal's hands steadying him. Mouth slackened and panting wide eyed with lust, Will had taken every merciless thrust.

He had bitten into Will's neck when he had come tasting blood. Hannibal had trembled with the power of it, the intensity so mind numbing that there had been only the insane pleasure erupting below, his eyes closed and his senses overwhelmed save for the scent of sweet smelling musk in his nose and the tangles of curls in his face. Completely shattered, Will had collapsed into the bed, arms folded behind him flat against the mattress, exhausted and still heaving sobs into the pillow.

When Hannibal had finally come to back himself he had shakily slid off the slick flesh beneath him. Both of them had been drenched in sweat, their bodies gleaming in the firelight. He had found Will staring into his eyes. Proffering a lop-sided if not patient smile Will had raised his brows and looked upward toward the restraints. Hannibal had immediately released one wrist and then the other, wordlessly assessing Will's limbs for bruising. Pale pink welts were visible, but Will had done an admirable job of avoiding too many reminders.

Glancing at the blood on the pillowcase, Will had pressed trembling fingers to the wound at his neck glaring at Hannibal. Hannibal had gently pushed his fingers aside to examine his neck. He had indeed broken skin, but barely a scrape. When a cub plays with a lion he is bound to get bit.

That's going to leave a nasty bruise. Did you bring a scarf?

Will had blinked doleful blue eyes and had turned away to stare at the fire. Ignoring the brush off, Hannibal had taken one lean wrist into his hands and had swept his lips across soft skin tasting sweat and smelled his own distinct scent all over Will much to Will's open mouthed surprise. Overcome with possessiveness, he had covered the petal soft mouth with his, reveling in the way Will had folded into the embrace.

At some point Hannibal remembers he had gotten up to poke the embers in the fireplace and drop a couple logs before returning to bed while Will had staggered to the bathroom. Hannibal had listened to him rummage through the vanity for cotton balls and peroxide and gulp down water probably straight from the faucet. They had stretched out side by side on their backs, their bodies still sticky though the chilly air of the upstairs bedroom would dry them soon enough so they could crawl beneath the satin and bury themselves in flannel and wool.

Will had turned sideways suddenly to face him, the brush of lips upon his arm too brief but appreciated and he had closed his eyes, pressing his forehead to Hannibal's shoulder. He had splayed his fingers wide across Hannibal's chest to feel his heart beating, his breath a tingling of warmth upon his skin. Hannibal had basked in that warmth, relaxed into the mattress as Will's fingers had dragged along his stomach pressing into his flesh. Will had massaged his way down, eyes still closed to wrap his fingers around his cock, enclosing flaccid flesh in a pocket of warmth. And it was then that Hannibal had realized that it had been Will in control the entire time.

An experiment in empathy indeed.

Hannibal's weakness, his Achilles' heel, continues to plague his thoughts, salt rubbed into the wound Will left open and raw inside. Wounds cannot heal if they are opened again and again. Hannibal knows now that Will had a sense of Hannibal's affection for him, enough of a sense to use that affection, and enough of a sense to call and warn him of Jack's trap, a trap Will had helped to set. Hannibal understands that only now is Will aware of the depth and scope of what he had just begun to understand while bleeding out on his kitchen floor. The realization is why he twists in his inferno confused and afraid of emotions he is not sure are his.

Will is not setting a trap for Jack this time. Will wants to escape his inferno. Will's empathy may be the key to helping him see another way out. So infuriating…his Will. Who indeed knows Adam better than his creator?

The orange sun looms in the sky the promise of a very hot and humid Tuscan day tomorrow. Hannibal taps the gas pedal and speeds ever closer to Fiesole.

Jack Crawford sets down his phone upon one of the folders that covers his desk. He can't even see the wood for all the paper. The disgruntled look he wears is as sour as his stomach and he thinks it fortunate he likes the taste of the berry flavored antacids he pops like candy into his mouth. If he leaves Florence without an ulcer he will consider himself lucky. Raspberry chalk dissolves on his tongue and he grimaces at his silent phone. He has called the number Du Maurier allowed him to trace twice already and still no call back from her. He thinks he may yet be summoned to another tableau soon, if not today then tomorrow.

The air tastes stale and Jack feels the urge to pace as though doing so would hasten the storm and send the torrential rage that seems to hang like bated breath upon his neck. He hates the waiting and while most of what he does involves waiting he has never been good at it. Something has to break. The tension is interminable.

Will has yet to turn on or answer his new phone. Jack hopes the expensive new phone is not sitting at the nurses' station at Ospideli di Careggi. Will feels responsible for getting Ruggerio killed. He may not want Jack following him too closely as the tempest approaches.

Will's experience with Hannibal supports operating alone. He and Hannibal have unfinished business but Jack has his reservations about that. Jack has unfinished business with Hannibal, too. Hannibal and Du Maurier had certainly done their fair share of dividing and conquering back in Baltimore, and Hannibal had alienated Will from everyone else. Will remains alienated.

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford.

Will's not alone.

No, he's not.

At the time, Jack had been referring to himself but Du Maurier had not been referring to Jack's company. And the other day at the restaurant, she had reminded him of the same thing again.

Each of them is lonely, Agent Crawford, in their own way. They understand each other. Who among us does not desire to be understood? Which of us would not be seduced by that kind of acceptance?

But this time, Will is not completely alienated and ensconced in a concentrated cocoon with Hannibal. He has Doctor Clayton. Clayton may be… Jack searches for the right word to edit the increasingly uncomfortable narrative in his head… *emotionally* attached to Will, but Jack thinks perhaps that is a good thing considering the magnitude of the magnetism between Will and Hannibal. Clayton likely provides Will with some much needed perspective and Clayton is not tainted by events in Baltimore. Clayton is a highly competent psychiatrist. He is not ethically compromised.

Like Du Maurier who seems to go out of her way to paint herself the long suffering and unappreciated martyr who has lost everything treating her pathological patient and keeping him stable. Jack grinds his jaw thinking of the gall of the woman to suggest that the appearance of the Paolini twins had somehow undone all her therapy with Hannibal. As if…

Jack remembers the hint of resentment he had detected in Du Maurier's tone despite the drama she attaches to everything she says. Jack had found her vaguely condescending as she had reminded Jack she has been Hannibal's sole companion for the past year, trying to convince Jack that her bead on Hannibal is more credible, more reliable than Will's. In fact, Du Maurier goes out of her way to discredit Will, even her sympathy is delivered disparagingly, grudgingly as though Will had asked for the abuse Hannibal steeped upon him every step of the way.

Fractured valentines in the broken bodies of the Paolini?

Jack has been sensing jealousy all along. Du Maurier has always known what Hannibal is. Their liaison or partnership has been mutually beneficial and gratifying. It was until Hannibal's infatuation with Will changed all that. Once Will became his patient, and Du Maurier gradually became aware of his existence and his importance to Hannibal, her relationship with Hannibal changed. And she didn't like it.

Hannibal thinks Will is a killer. Do you still believe he is your killer?

I have to believe.

If you think you're about to catch Hannibal, that's because he wants you to think that. Don't fool yourself into thinking he's not in control of what's happening.

Jack had thought to take some of that control away from Hannibal and surprise him. He had convinced himself that Will had gotten in over his head, had gotten so far into Hannibal's head that Jack could no longer believe in him. When Purnell had pulled the plug, Jack had acted emotionally. It had seemed to Jack that Providence had smiled too long on Hannibal. Du Maurier's words had proved prophetic.

Jack wonders still what would have happened had he not gone to Hannibal's home early and alone. What might have happened if he had called Will to tell him the plan had been scrapped by Purnell? Alana had warned Will and he had come. Alana had come. A triad of disaster. Will has never asked him why he didn't call and why Jack had felt it necessary to go to dinner without him. If Alana had not called, would Will have shown up? Would he have called Hannibal anyway?

Why had Will entered with his weapon, but not used it?

Jack had heard nothing but the beating of his heart while sequestered in Hannibal's pantry. He remembers calling Bella. His hold on life had been but a tenuous cord and he felt himself floating above the broken bottles of wine and blood drenched floor as Will and Abigail had been bleeding out on the other side of the splintered door.

Events in Florence have caused Jack to reevaluate events in Baltimore. He suspects Will has done some reevaluating, too. And so has Hannibal.

Well, in isolation, a moment can't really speak to motive, intent or aftermath.

Aspic is derived from bone as a life is made from moments.

So, tell me, Hannibal, what moment are we in now? You, me, Will?

Still harboring doubts about Will?

Jack is still harboring doubts as black clouds loom ever closer. But, he is no longer seeing moments in isolation either. Jack had acted independently last time. Will had reacted. Hannibal had anticipated. What is really happing this time, in this moment?

There is the situation with Will and the Paolini to consider. Will's insistence on taking to the bleachers smacks of subterfuge and Jack is inclined to let him have his time out. Not that he has much choice with Clayton officially pronouncing Will unfit for duty. He has no doubt Clayton will follow up with an equally official addendum to his initial letter. Will has earned his little break. Jack knows Will had not expected to be part of Hannibal's tableau and he certainly would not have agreed to it. Conflicted about Hannibal or enamored with him, Will Graham would never voluntarily cooperate with Hannibal to appear in a sideshow like Jack had witnessed this morning.

Will may be sitting this one out with the FBI, but Jack suspects Will is not finished with Hannibal. Not by a long shot. Hannibal might have staged Will like that for the express purpose of pissing him off. Will had said Hannibal was deliberately confusing him. Jack imagines the proximity grating on the both of them, the magnetism even more intense after this latest encounter. Will has plenty to be angry about. He had been completely humiliated this morning. Who wouldn't be? He had somehow managed to maintain his dignity throughout the ordeal but Jack knows the concentration of attention had been unbearable for him.

Jack knows too that Will had shared but a fraction of the thoughts in his head. Jack will never know where his imagination had taken him this morning but Will might share those destinations with Clayton. Clayton may very well be supporting Will in whatever he has planned and declaring him unfit is only part of it.

Jack pauses as Will's design crashes into his skull. Will is setting himself up for an insanity defense. He is at the very least laying the psychological groundwork to explain what he intends to do and allowing wriggle room for Jack to exonerate himself. Jack smirks with the beauty of it. Clayton will no doubt be available to treat him in the aftermath having already developed a special rapport with the traumatized former profiler.

Jack has to wonder if Will's interpretation of the tableau isn't right on the money. Hannibal is not the forgiving type, but he is possessive. Punishing Will every chance he gets is in character with what he knows about Hannibal. He has to concede that perhaps Will has been right all along. If that is the case, then his interpretation of the Paolini tableaux would be accurate, too. Du Maurier's part is equally difficult to discern.

He had given the GPS tracker to Du Maurier, knowing she could be colluding with Hannibal, but offering her a way out had been necessary to meet with her. Now, Jack knows that there are only two possible realities where Du Maurier is concerned. Either she really is colluding with Hannibal, in which case she may have assisted in this latest tableau and possibly the others. Or, she had tried to set Hannibal up and failed. But had Du Maurier known about the blonde hairs? Had she placed them in the crime scenes or had Hannibal? Jack thinks he prefers Du Maurier become a tableau rather than entertain the possibility that Du Maurier may be endeavoring to unveil a tableau of her own. Hannibal might have found himself a more willing partner than Will.

How else has Du Maurier avoided becoming one of Hannibal's tableaux?

Jack grunts to himself thinking Du Maurier may have run out of her manufactured luck. She simply may not have fit into the particular narrative Hannibal had decided upon for Ruggerio and Will. Hannibal's pathology points to a continued variation on Dante's *contrapasso,* and only Hannibal knows what punishment fits Du Maurier's sin against him if she has in fact committed one.

Du Maurier strikes Jack as a strategist of the highest caliber capable of the same degree of influence and manipulation as Hannibal. He can see Hannibal sipping wine with her far more easily than he can see Hannibal sharing a glass with Will. Jack is beginning to think that Du Maurier had been a frequent dinner guest of Hannibal's in Baltimore, an invisible presence at the table, a silent partner privy to her patient's pathology all along.

Unfortunately, there is no way to know. Jack eyes the large round container of flavored antacids and thinks it wouldn't hurt to lay off the coffee and pasta either. He glances again to his phone and decides he has procrastinated calling Mason long enough. Mason will be uncooperative and insufferable, but Jack needs to listen closely to what he doesn't say. The phone chirps suddenly and Jack grabs it up and smiles. It's Will actually using his new phone.

"Hello…Will? I can hardly hear you."

"Sorry Jack…driving to Fiesole now…have you…Pazzi?"

"Haven't talked to Pazzi all day. Ruggerio's family must be keeping him officially busy."

"Okay…some dinner and some sleep…" The rest of Will's words fade in and out but Jack gets the gist. "call you…morning."

"I think I'll do the same. Be careful. Goodbye, Will."

Jack pops a couple of purple tablets into his mouth and reaches for the whiskey he keeps in his desk. He stares at the bottle a moment before reconsidering and reaching for his bottle of water instead. He punches in Verger's number and is very surprised he picks up.

"Agent Crawford. To what…do I owe the pleasure of your phone call?"

"Hello, Mr. Verger. Status mostly. I suppose you saw the news from Florence this morning?"

"I did. Our boy Lecter did a number on the Polizia, didn't he? And Graham… Not injured was he?"

“No, but shaken up.”

“Shaken up very publically. I do hope you pass along my condolences to the Polizia and to Mr. Graham.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. Have you made any progress in helping the Paolini see the wisdom in allowing the FBI to do its job?”

“Funny you should inquire about that. I spoke with one of the *famiglia* this morning…lovely people, very salt of the earth if you get my drift.”

“I think so. What did they say?”

“They saw the news this morning, too and I think they have reassessed the situation, regrouping so to speak. Between me and you…I think they mean to let the Polizia suffer the losses from here on out.”

‘Had enough funerals, have they?”

“Ha! I think that hits the nail on the coffin. They want to bury their dead, Agent Crawford.”

“I can understand that.”

“Well…if there isn’t anything else, it’s time for my bath.”

“No…nothing else at the moment. Thank you, Mr. Verger.”

Jack sets the phone down and frowns. He recognizes misdirection when he sees it. Mason had been expecting Jack’s call and knows Jack was fishing. Mason just threw him a polite load of pig shit. Jack believes the Paolini have backed off for the time being. It makes perfect sense to allow the Polizia to absorb the casualties while they sit back and wait for someone, like Pazzi, to do the dirty work. The Paolini will still have their revenge.

Calling Will now would be a waste of time since the phone signal is weak while traveling. Jack decides to wait a while and give him time to get back to Fiesole. Pazzi is dealing with Ruggerio’s family and the fallout from this morning. Jack has time to grab something decent to eat and get rid of some of these files.

Rinaldo Pazzi scowls testily at the image of Mason Verger on the small computer screen inside the wireless café off Piazza Savonarola, not far from the University of Syracuse Library. He had left Alonso and the distraught Signora Ruggerio west of the city about an hour ago and after receiving a cryptic text from an unknown number, had pulled over to call the international number given in the text message suspecting Verger, but not certain.

An unfamiliar voice had answered and after he had addressed himself and read back the password of random letters and numbers in the text he had been promptly told to find a public computer, log in to a specific address, and follow the instructions on the recorded message he would receive in a few minutes.

He had selected a café near the university for several reasons. It was on the way, it was full of students who would pay him no mind, and it was far from any Polizia precinct. No chance he would run into anyone he knew or who would know him. What he did not know as he had sat at a corner table facing the entrance was that the café was smoke free.

He hunches over the now secured laptop and glowers at the students sipping smoothies the color of dirt and smelling like fresh cut grass. His luck to find an enclave of environmentalists and artists. Wishing again for the cigarette he cannot light he stares at the disfigured face of Mason Verger and manages to keep the disgust from creeping into his features. Verger is positively grotesque. The appearance is revolting enough without the slurping sound of the waxen tongue darting between the two rows of exposed teeth that line the lipless gaping maw.

Verger had explained he was in between grafts and Pazzi finds himself wondering if the man is shocked every time he looks in a mirror, or if he has grown used to his appearance. Pazzi cannot imagine the vitriol that would spew every time he looked at himself. The surgeries must be painful and disappointingly frequent. Apparently, the last donor's skin, another attempt at lips, was rejected leaving Verger's mouth looking more reptilian than human.

Pazzi is reminded of that movie about the Elephant Man except that Verger does not inspire pity. A part of Pazzi's brain recognizes that Verger was a repulsive creature before Lecter got hold of him. He gazes at Lecter's handiwork, his pronouncement of *contrapasso* on the offending Verger and thinks Lecter had it in his mind to turn the man inside out, make the flesh on the outside as ugly as the inside. Lecter had carved him up like one of his pigs.

"So this is what Lecter did to you?"

Mason's initial impulse is to agree with the increasingly corruptible cop who sits smoothing his beard as though utterly bored and Mason's appearance is a common occurrence for him. Pazzi has a very good poker face. He'll need it.

Mason does not receive many visitors, but the few who have managed an audience with him invariably forget themselves at some point. The revulsion always surfaces and Mason is gratified when it does, because the real emotions are in view. He would be supremely impressed if an individual could conduct conversation with him without the squeamish expressions. There is possibly one person who could manage it, and ironically that is Lecter.

Lecter has not seen him since the deed was done, and Mason would expect nothing but condescension from the pompous cannibal who had told him to eat his own nose. But, Lecter would not flinch at seeing Mason now or hide behind insincere platitudes. He would gaze at him with perfectly polite curiosity and then insult him relentlessly. Lecter will get his chance to ogle his handiwork very soon.

Now, Graham is another story. Graham had been to see him. Had dropped by the estate to take a meeting with Mason in person, the only way Mason would bankroll his Italian vacation. He had wanted to see Graham for himself, assess his state of mind in the wake of his lovers' quarrel with Lecter. Outwardly, Graham had not seemed particularly damaged considering Lecter had split him open, had in fact looked reasonably healthy. Same slender muscular build, same hair, same sad haunted look about him and yet beneath the quiet words Mason had heard the echoes of the cocky baby daddy who had brazenly punched him and then pulled a gun on him in his own barn.

Dr. Lecter is the one you want to be feeding to your pigs.

Graham had at least paid him the courtesy of blinking those expressive blue eyes repeatedly, his pretty mouth contorted in sympathy that Mason did not want or need from him, but he had recognized as involuntary on Graham's part. According to Margot, Graham has some empathy disorder. Mason has no idea what that even means. It certainly doesn't do much to explain Mr. Graham's callous behavior. Mason thinks the lack of empathy is more like it. Lecter probably diagnosed him.

At any rate, Graham had quickly frozen his exquisite face into a mask of impassivity, but his eyes had remained fixed on Mason's ruined visage, glistening with intensity and no doubt memorizing every sickening detail.

Seems I lost our game of chicken, Mr. Graham.

We were never playing chicken, Mason. You can't win if you don't know what game you're playing.

Mason rolls his baby blue eyes at Cordell for another drink. His eyes and the shocks of blonde hair he stubbornly maintains are all he recognizes of his former self, and it has taken these many months for him to awaken from his dreams without nearly screaming in panic when he opens his eyes. But this Pazzi is going to go toe to toe with Lecter and with the equally culpable Graham. He thinks it better that Pazzi, who seems to suffer from a terminal case of misplaced conceit know the truth before he ruins Mason's plans with complacency.

"In answer to your question, detective, Doctor Lecter only broke my neck. The job on my face… well I did that to myself."

Pazzi's mouth drops open, he is both incredulous and morbidly fascinated. "How…could that happen?"

A variety of psychedelic compounds… Psychedelic so named from the Greek for "mind-revealing"… Show me how papa would check for the depth of a pig's fat…

"A blast of hallucinogens that caused a complete break from reality. Terrifying and enchanting. I didn't feel a thing."

The teeth gnash together as the sutures pucker over pasty cheeks and Pazzi's stomach churls. He rubs at his whiskers, fingers sliding over his own mouth compulsively as he listens to Verger's voice crackle in its odd cadence across the miles into the bud planted in his ear. He glances around the café before leaning closer.

"He convinced you to do that…to yourself?"

"He is a silver tongued devil, detective. And he enjoyed every minute."

"And Graham. Was he in on it, or is he just Lecter's love interest?"

Mason hears the spite worm its way into Pazzi's voice as he spits out Graham's name. Pazzi is an angry dog chomping at his leash to get to him. Graham seems to have the remarkable talent of making people despise him despite his looks. Everyone but Lecter. But Mason knows what manner of monster lies beneath the fetching façade and it is every bit as dangerous as the one concealed beneath Doctor Lecter's fabulous suits.

He should have been more forthcoming with Lucia and Luciano, but neither of them had been the sharpest knife in the drawer and if they had known the truth a working relationship would never have developed and Graham would have become suspicious. Given what happened to them, it appears Graham may have suspected all along. Crawford had not confirmed anything, but Graham had obviously manipulated the twins and had sacrificed them to draw out Lecter.

This Pazzi has evidently been reading up on Tattle Crime. That spicy dish Lounds can read between the lines the FBI can't or won't. Lounds had tried to interview him, then Margot before finally being escorted off the manor, twice. However, telling tales out of school would only alert Lecter and Graham that he had remembered a lot more than they believe or hope he does.

What are you feeding my dogs?

Ha! Just me…

"To answer your question, his part was significant enough." Mason says realizing Pazzi's furtive glances mean he lapsed into one his introspective fugues again, much like the brilliant Beethoven lost in the symphony playing in his mind…

"Are they…involved?" Pazzi says, deciding to allow Verger to put his own spin on whatever it is.

Verger rolls his tongue suggestively over large and shiny teeth and the wild blue eyes narrow with a decidedly lecherous gleam.

"Mr. Graham is Doctor Lecter's opium. Doctor Lecter is the needle Mr. Graham enjoys stabbing himself with."

Mason is rewarded with a knowing smirk from Pazzi. Mason decides he sort of likes this little Italian weasel. It's certainly much more fun talking to him than the prim and morose Crawford.

Mason does not tell Pazzi that Graham's primary concern that afternoon was what Mason was feeding to his dogs or that his other concern was the stain on his carpet. Mason remembers Lecter and Graham discussing what to do with him over mugs of coffee as he had sat bleeding, unable to move and tripping his balls off in Graham's living room. If he tells Pazzi everything, Pazzi might bolt. No one is that greedy.

"Do you think Graham wants to catch him, kill him, or join him?" Pazzi says suddenly serious.

"He wants to catch him. The scar Lecter left is for real. I doubt Graham saw *that* coming. I don't need to know what Graham wants to do beyond catching him. I'll find out what Graham really wants once you have delivered both of them."

Pazzi shifts in his seat, the feeling that the conversation is taking too long nags at him. He has no idea what Verger plans on doing with Lecter and Graham except that he plans to kill them. Verger is quite mad, has been for a while, but he does understand Lecter and Graham very well. It is apparent to Pazzi that whatever Verger experienced with them revealed a lot more than Crawford is aware of. Verger's reward and his association with the Paolini reveals his disdain for the law and his fortune guarantees he has the best lawyers who allow him to get away with it. He couldn't tell Crawford the truth about what happened between the three of them because he had obviously engaged in something criminal himself. Crawford is not so obtuse as to be unaware of Verger's intended retaliation.

One thing is perfectly clear. Verger desires that their punishment is commensurate with what they did to him. At the very least, torture is on the menu for Graham and his cannibal boyfriend. Whatever it is, Pazzi does not have to stick around for it. He has no feelings about Lecter one way or the other. As for Graham, Pazzi will not lose any sleep over him, especially not while sleeping under stars far away from here.

“The FBI has quite an operation here. Agent Crawford might just bring Lecter in.”

“Ha! Crawford couldn’t find Lecter in a locked room with a flashlight.” Verger practically drools down his pajamas and he pauses to allow a fresh white napkin to dab at his chin.

“Revenge should be taken by the one aggrieved. An eye for an eye. Nothing like biblical style justice Papa used to say.”

Pazzi identifies immediately with Verger’s righteous vengeance. He does not need to ask what Mason might have done to prompt such a malicious sentence. That Lecter and Graham could reduce a human being to this broken lump of flesh is inconceivable. He thinks it very likely Graham enjoys watching Lecter’s debauched violence. He had probably watched Lecter kill Ruggerio before things went a little too far like that reporter had suggested.

“Crawford is protective of Graham. He seems to believe almost everything Graham tells him.”

“Or course he does. Mr. Graham is as silver tongued as Doctor Lecter.”

Mason’s blue eyes roll up for a moment as he remembers where those tongues have been in raging Technicolor. Much of what was said between Lecter and Graham that afternoon is lost to him, their conversation difficult to follow and his own drug induced hallucinations had taken center stage.

He had felt as though he had been experiencing a dream, slipping effortlessly into the slaughterhouses of his youth and sharing it alternately with Doctor Lecter, Papa, and a well-dressed pig. Then, Graham had shown up, demanding to know what Mason was feeding to his dogs when it had been plain he had been feeding himself to the wonderful pigs at his feet. Mason had awakened the next day, body desensitized, but not so numb that he couldn’t scream helplessly at the image peering back at him from the mirror in Margot’s hand. His doctors had sedated him again, immediately.

The second time the screaming had not lasted long and he had stared at the ravaged remains of his former self, had forced himself to gaze upon the mass of skinless raw flesh that had been his face. He had been unable to move but he had been able to think. It had been then that he realized he had been experiencing reality through a sadistic lens; Lecter had been his tour guide through a hellish wonderland using his own childhood to chart its course. Lecter had used every scrap of information Mason had babbled in therapy against him.

Gradually, Mason had realized that not everything he had seen and heard that day had been a hallucination; some of it had been real even if he remembered it through a haze. Over time, he had reconstructed the events of that day and though gaps remain, large chunks of memory gone forever like the strips of flesh he carved from his face, he remembers bits and pieces, one little bit in particular. And he has clung to it, precious morsel of bitterness that it is.

Bach had been playing, the first of his Brandenburg concertos. Lecter had lifted him from the chair and he had been looking upside down at Graham who had seemed suspended from the ceiling bathed in a column of sunlight…and the next minute, he had found himself on the floor. He had watched a pair of shoes nearly scuff his face as the soles had sailed over his head and his eyes had followed the shoes along the carpet to join the other pair of shoes. He had looked up at the two of them facing each other, Lecter's hands cupping Graham's face, Graham's fingers crawling up Lecter's arms, the both of them staring into each other's eyes.

Hannibal…he's…right there…

What Mason is experiencing is an altered reality, expressions of his own latent desires. Aren't you, Mason?

Latent desires…oh! Summer camp, yes… I don't have any candy…

Images of naked lithe young bodies upon crumpled sheets, faces smeared with chocolate had sifted through his mind like feathers falling from the roof of the barn. He had been floating, soaring on the notes of the concerto blaring from Graham's cheap stereo, the smell of damp dog and decay everywhere. Mason had not realized that he had been inhaling odors from his own body. And then Lecter had leaned in closer, still holding Graham's face in his hands and he had kissed him full on the mouth. Graham had stood as still as a statue, except for greedy lips that had nearly sucked Lecter's lips off his face.

Suddenly angry, Graham had pulled back…

Not here…not now. Please…

Mason had watched him stomp out the door with the soiled chair he had just been reduced to blood and carnage in, the footsteps echoing loudly, bouncing off the walls as Mason had continued to float over the pigs wandering around the carpet and Lecter had poured himself another cup of coffee…

"Agent Crawford is using Graham. You know, I used to be an attractive fellow, just as pretty as Mr. Graham, excellent breeding stock." Mason says raising his eyebrows so they disappear under a fringe of pale yellow straw.

Pazzi licks his lips not sure where the conversation is headed but knowing he does not want to go there. He is beginning to think that Baltimore is full of crazy people.

"Well, if it's children you want I'm sure medical science could provide."

"Yes, but how to make the Stradivarius sing again?" Mason slurps up his drool loudly and Pazzi's stomach takes a turn for the worse.

"Your message said it was urgent that we speak." Pazzi prompts.

"Oh yes…it did. Ha! You'll have to grab Graham yourself and bring him to the location."

"Why? That is not what we discussed."

"No, but plans change. Our partners won't risk anymore losses in retrieving him. You'll have to improvise."

"You put me in a difficult position. After this morning, I will be watched more closely, my decisions are now under scrutiny."

"Ah yes, I'm sorry about your man. Nothing ventured, nothing gained Papa used to say. Of course, you would be compensated for the inconvenience."

“By how much?”

“A quarter.”

Pazzi nods his head slowly at Verger. Another two hundred fifty K in unmarked bills delivered to a secure safety deposit box in Deutsche Bank right here in Firenze.

“You could set up an anonymous fund for your fallen compatriot.” Verger suggests.

“So could you.” Pazzi retorts.

The blue eyes begin to droop a little, the medication Cordell conveniently stirs into his lemonade is taking effect and it is almost time for his nap. His mouth can’t quite grasp the straw Cordell holds out for him and the drink dribbles down his striped silk pajamas.

The Paolini are an emotional bunch and Mason is used to their antics and their passionate natures, but their most recent communication was especially prickly. Though Carlo’s brother, Vincenzo, spoke in his usual flat monosyllabic manner, Mason had detected something different, something akin to impatience and if Mason were to be less complimentary he would call it disrespect.

The Paolini have worked for his family for three generations now and Mason supposes in all that time they have never had to deal with anything like Lecter. He and Graham are responsible for the deaths of six of their family members. Mason tells himself that what he heard was frustration and the low rumble of Sardinian vengeance in Vincenzo’s throat. All Mason has to do is give him a knife and set him on Lecter. The Paolini weren’t especially sympathetic about the loss of Pazzi’s detective, but Mason thinks he understands their reasoning for that.

He wonders what Papa would think of his trap…

“Signor Verger?”

Mason blinks as Cordell holds out his cup and straw to him again. Mason shoves it away with his tongue, spilling it.

Pazzi looks aside, waits for the assistant to wipe Verger off and reminds himself all this will be worth it when he is sitting far from here in a first class seat anywhere with Allegra by his side. It is in the middle of the afternoon and though he doesn’t know what time it is in Baltimore, Pazzi thinks Verger must live in his expensive pajamas around the clock. No point in dressing up.

“How can you be so sure Lecter will come? It is possible he knows the Paolini are connected to you. He probably tortured it out of the twins or Graham told him. He has already helped Graham avoid getting captured once already.”

“I saw the pictures of this morning’s circus at the Boboli Gardens. Lecter made a saint of your detective and laid out a very delectable feast with Graham. He’ll come.”

“Using Polizia to secure Graham is risky. Very risky. He’ll be armed.”

“You’ll have to take your chances. The reward is for Lecter. Graham is gravy. If recent events are any indication, Lecter won’t tolerate anyone else messing with meat that belongs to him. Graham knows it and he’s counting on it. He has his own agenda with Lecter. Got a better plan?”

Pazzi curls lips that feel stiff, but the grimace resembles a smile for Verger though his limbs turn to ice and the tiny hairs on his neck stand on edge. Mason has him over the proverbial barrel, but they will not be shooting mere fish in that barrel.

“No, I don’t. How will you know I’ve delivered Graham? What about our partners?”

“Just get him there. Our partners will be on site to handle the rest.”

“And the reward?”

“You received the incentive?”

“Yes.”

“Upon receipt of *both* of them, the reward will be deposited. And don’t mess up Graham. I want to watch Lecter do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you put two animals in a cage, escape available to only one, the stronger will devour the weaker to get out.”

“These are intelligent animals. If that avenue of escape isn’t real…”

“That won’t matter if remaining in the cage is unwise.”

* * *

Will stares at the setting sun spilling its rust colored light along the road ahead. He thinks it very much like the blood tinged moon of his dark inferno where night is eternal. Thoughts of his encounters with Freddie Lounds in Baltimore have been swimming around his head the entire drive. Memories of dragging her out of her car kicking and screaming until she had realized that Will was only holding her tightly in his arms so she could calm down and listen to him. That memory had led to memories of the celebratory dinner in her honor and the festivities that had followed upstairs.

He had been drunk that night. So had Hannibal despite his unwavering ability to enunciate despite two bottles of Chateau Mouton Rothschild Bordeaux…and that had just been Hannibal. Will thinks he plowed through two bottles himself. A most revealing evening it had been despite the alcohol, or perhaps because of it…

“Will?”

Will shakes off the reverie. Daniel has pulled into the driveway and Will hardly remembers getting here.

“I um…zoned out, didn’t I?”

Daniel chuckles, “You were practically comatose. Where were you?”

“Everywhere.” Will shakes his head and rubs at his stiff neck. “It feels like days since I’ve been here. The yard looks good. Got some frustration out?”

“Yeah, Crawford pulled up while I was cutting the grass. Got your stuff?”

Daniel nods at the bag in the back seat and glances toward the front of the house. The dogs are wagging their tails furiously on the other side of the screen door. He can hear them whining from the car. He looks around the yard and feels like he has forgotten something. It’s an annoying feeling. He looks to Will trying to figure if it’s Will feeling disoriented, or him.

“You going to park in the garage, or leave it here?” Will asks, hefting the bag out of the car and slamming the door.

“I um…think I’ll leave it here.”

Will looks over at Daniel, “Something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Something’s different.”

“Different, how?”

Daniel looks again at the dogs and his stomach gives a lurch as he realizes what the something different is. “Will…I locked up when I left. I didn’t…leave the door open. I shouldn’t see the dogs.”

Will nods and stands very still for a moment. Daniel watches him stand erect suddenly.

“You hear that?” Will asks.

Daniel listens and the faint sound of music floats from the house. He nods at Will becoming more confused and agitated with every second. He feels the agitation from Will on top of his own and he forces himself to breathe.

“Bach.” Will says. “I don’t suppose you left music on for dogs. And I don’t suppose the dogs have figured out how to start dinner either.”

Will’s tone is flat and listless but his eyes are not. He stands stunned while Will’s fingers find his sleeve and he pulls Daniel towards him but Daniel is already prickling all over, needles poking flesh before Will can say another word.

“Just walk up to the door like everything is normal. We don’t know if the Polizia are here yet. I suspect not, but just in case they have set up a detail between when he arrived and now, we should be careful.”

Daniel nods slowly, swallowing the bile that has appeared out of nowhere and decides he should wait to throw up in the house. He closes his eyes for a couple seconds and takes a breath before following Will up the walk. Will’s hand rides the grip of his gun tucked into the back of his trousers as he approaches, handing off the bag to Daniel as they step onto the front porch.

Will touches the handle. It’s unlocked. Of course it is. Will flings open the door and walks in like he hasn’t a care in the world. The dogs are ecstatic at seeing Will and Daniel, and Daniel manages to bend down and accept the muzzles in his face and the kisses.

The aroma of garlic and butter assails Will’s nostrils as a Bach concerto plays on Daniel’s laptop. The piano lid is up and the bench has been pulled out. Will recognizes the violin duet playing having drunk many tumblers of whiskey listening to this same sweet duet in the salon. It is a favorite piece, for both of them. A flash of movement registers to his left and he turns keeping his expression as devoid of emotion as possible.

“Hello, Hannibal.”

“Buongiorno!” Hannibal says, stepping out from the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Daniel borrows a quote from Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, Act 4 Scene 1 and changes it slightly to fit their specific situation. Bassanio is scolding the heartless Shylock for demanding his pound of flesh from his friend Antonio.
Hannibal lifts a quote from William Blake’s The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, “In opposition we find true friendship.”
Roberta alters a quote from Voltaire’s Candide, “If God created us in his own image, we have more than reciprocated.

Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

Hannibal dines with Will and Daniel in Fiesole. They drink some wine and have a good time. Until Pazzi shows up.

Steam billows with a hiss as Hannibal pours the sherry and shakes the pan over the flames. A long sigh escapes Will and he clears his throat, thoughts gathered so he can selectively unpack them and spread them out before Hannibal. He does not want to discuss his little mouse with Hannibal, but there are certain realities that Will must face sooner or later. Clayton fuels the fires of his inferno as much as Hannibal.

“Casting stones already?” Will says without looking up, entranced by the trails his fingers make in the film of flour.

“His perception is abetted by a gift not unlike your own.” Hannibal says.

“A gift you helped yourself to. He’s not…your therapist.” Will flicks the flour destroying his little circles.

“On the contrary, I told Freddie Lounds that’s exactly what he was.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 77

Hannibal dines with Will and Daniel in Fiesole. They drink some wine and have a good time. Until Pazzi shows up.

Giasone, Roberto Ferri

> *Hector fell in the dust and Achilles shouted out in triumph: 'While you were despoiling Patroclus, no doubt, in your folly, you thought yourself quite safe, Hector, and forgot all about me in my absence. Far from him, by the hollow ships, was a mightier man, who should have been his helper but stayed behind, and that was I, who now have brought you low. The dogs and carrion birds will tear apart your flesh, but him the Achaeans will bury.*
>
> *Iliad, Book XXII*

Sunlight scrawls across his chiselled cheeks as Hannibal halts at the edge of the carpet. He assumes a comfortable stance to greet Will and Daniel. Both have slowed their advance, his blue-eyed cub gazes back at him prickly and defiant, his right hand bent behind his back while the green-eyed mouse, open mouthed but too stunned to speak, drops the gym bag and sinks to his knees to calm himself with his dogs.

Fusion, Hannibal thinks as he locks eyes with Will and he feels a rippling of heat; the exchange of atoms, of breath, and of the blood that courses through both their veins. It is an amalgamation of souls melding for a moment, caught like the dawn when night and day are indistinguishable and the moment passes too quickly. Hannibal rubs at the raw pastry sticking to his fingers with a dishtowel glancing at the dusting of flour on his sleeves and dark navy twill trousers. A similar moment in his kitchen in Baltimore erupts in his mind as he stares into the stormy sea of blue, a shared instance of déjà vu so fleeting Hannibal would believe he imagined it but for the misting of Will's eyes.

“Hello, Hannibal.”

The familiar voice cracks comfortable and warm, split leather by a fireplace, a tumbler of aged whiskey pressed into his palm.

Will’s tongue trips over the syllables of his name in that way he has, plucking just the right notes. He even manages to pluck a couple new ones as Hannibal stares into the pale blue eyes desperately trying to appear angry when Will is clearly not.

“Buongiorno!” Hannibal returns.

The blue eyes flicker with affection that melts away with a blink, the exquisite jaw shifts from side to side as Will acclimates to the multiple implications at finding him here, the thoughts in his skull too numerous to articulate at the moment. It occurs to Hannibal he may still be a tad bit irritable about being trussed up at Boboli Gardens this morning but that was hours ago. Will should learn to relax.

“Is there a gun in your pants or just happy to see me?”

Hannibal‘s lips curve ever so slightly and the dark eyes crease ever so playfully.

Will frowns at the face beaming at him from across the carpet and he lets loose a long suffering sigh, removes the Beretta, engages the safety and lays it on the kitchen table.

“That’s four times, Will.” Hannibal says as Will rolls weary blue eyes.

“I didn’t draw the weapon. Doesn’t count.” Will retorts, quickly looking away.

Fission, Will thinks as every molecule in his body seems to dissolve and rearrange itself. His two universes have just collided and he is a plume of dust suspended between them. His own heartbeat seems to slow as the room freezes and the only sound Will hears is the clicking of Daniel’s mantle clock ticking, ticking, ticking until the thicket of thoughts implode and the Bach Concerto soars above the beating of his heart as he breathes again. The air is saturated with sautéed seasonings and the scent of sandalwood and spiced leather.

Daniel’s house smells like Hannibal’s.

He should have anticipated this. The lion is loose; his appetite once whetted will not be sated until he has what he wants. Their circle of violence and intimacy had been interrupted last evening, the meal in Impruneta merely a prelude. The tableau at Boboli Gardens an amusing diversion. Hannibal had shared more than a peasant’s repast with Daniel this morning; he had tasted blood and breath and had followed the scintillating scent and his instincts here. And somewhere along the way he had dispensed with Freddie Lounds.

Dinner. Will *knows* the ingredients sizzling on the stove and baking in the oven are not… vegetarian. His own den unsafe, the lion has brought his kill here. He had, predictably, made himself at home first; essentially pissing all over Daniel’s house his presence purposely evident everywhere. Will would not be surprised if he had taken a shower but he probably hadn’t had the time.

The bowls and utensils he used to prepare dinner are drying on the drain board and the counter space has been rearranged to suit his particular habits and preferences. The table is already arranged with three place settings, a bottle of Daniel's own wine sits opened to breathe; the red stained cork rests beside the unassuming jug of Chianti. He couldn't resist tinkling the ivories, though the violin remains in its case untouched.

Will notes the crack of space between door jamb and door leading to the basement and he has no reason to think that Hannibal did not wander around upstairs. Will quickly shoves thoughts of sleeping arrangements in a fort overflowing with forbidden images; they have to get through dinner first.

Daniel still crouches on the carpet compulsively petting his dogs, the large green eyes leveled at Hannibal. Will's impulse is to close the few feet between them to place a reassuring hand on Daniel's shoulder. While the gesture would comfort Daniel, it would send Hannibal's predatory instincts to rustling like tall blades of grass in the wind. Daniel's gentle mist floats faintly about Will, a fragile spray susceptible to the crackling current all around him.

This is Daniel's home and Daniel needs to put Hannibal in his place, not Will. Hannibal is waiting to see which of them will confront him. He hovers, the celestial center of his universe curious if the little moon fawning over his dogs can manage an eclipse on his own. Will knows Daniel has it in him.

"You have a lovely home, Doctor Clayton, and a well-stocked kitchen. My compliments." Hannibal coos.

"Thank you. Not much of a security system, though."

Daniel looks up from the dogs feeling more confident, perhaps siphoning some strength from Will. His forehead crinkles with the thought that might not be all he has siphoned.

Clayton's frown is a reflection of the one already plastered to Will's face. Hannibal rolls his shoulders, an approximation of an apology for the little brown mouse looking at him with those startlingly expressive emerald eyes of his.

"A necessary intrusion. You are aware of the situation with Mason Verger?"

Daniel rises slowly from the carpet and clears his throat, not sure of his own voice but sensing urgency from Will. Hannibal's prideful possessiveness simmers like cinders in Will's presence; the arrogance of the man floats upon his cordiality like an oil slick and Daniel's being roils swept up in the swell of Will's tumultuous tide alternately engulfed in Hannibal's flames. Because he feels Will's and Hannibal's emotions simultaneously, his nerves are strung painfully taut like one of the strings on his violin and Daniel recognizes he needs to take the tuning peg down a little despite the waves of dizzying nausea that he feels every time he takes a gander at his kitchen.

Will killed Luciano here, hacked him up in the basement and stored what didn't make it into his cubist masterpiece in the modest freezer behind the steps. Now, Hannibal is playing chef in his kitchen. He has clearly explored Daniel's home with the same concentrated attention as he had his office. As violated as Daniel feels, Hannibal is polite to the point of ridiculous and despite his intrusion expects graciousness in return.

"I know the deal with Mason." Daniel says clearing his throat again because swallowing feels like the scraping of dried bones. "I called the office…seems you kept your word."

"I always keep my promises."

Hannibal knows Clayton wants clarification on Lounds. Will certainly does. Clayton needs his closure so he can berate himself and begin reconciling his feelings. Will…is curious. He stands by the table in profile, knowing Hannibal appreciates this angle from which to admire what is his. Knowing that Hannibal will question whether the gesture is an overture of affection or manipulation. Hannibal's own words to Will hang in his consciousness and haunt every room of the memory palace he shares with Will.

We're just alike. This gives you the capacity to deceive me and be deceived by me…

And in the wee hours this morning while he had been arranging Will in his tableau at Boboli…

Trust is not a rose that blooms easily in our garden, is it?

Hannibal considers too the exchange with Clayton only this morning and is forced to admit the roses he would grow with Will have been rooted too long in arid soil. No wonder the garden cannot grow in Will's inferno.

You create a framework to avoid outright lies, but you deceive each other, nonetheless.

And why would we do that?

So you can delude yourselves and each other by carefully phrasing questions you don't really want the answers to. Outright lies leave no doubt as to blame. But, sins of omission perpetuate the game.

Clayton's words taunt and they prick and Hannibal's heart tightens like a fist as the regret grips him from within, a vice of his own design. Will is a predator, he has learned to listen to his instincts, to adapt, evolve, and become, but it is not his instinct to lie. Hannibal taught him that and apt pupil that he is, Will learned his lessons well.

Truth begets truth. Lies beget lies. If honest is what you want, then honesty is what you have to offer.

Will plays games, too.

One of you has to stop playing.

The playing will indeed stop at the walls of Troy. Will's moment of truth. Should they survive Mason's trap, Hannibal fully intends to have the honest conversation Will promised him.

Hannibal considers his cub poised over the kitchen table. Lashes and errant curls shield the blue eyes no doubt focused on the place settings while slender fingers caress his weapon of choice, the lustrously polished Beretta. The dark curls gloss over his collar as he lifts his head and turns to face Hannibal, mouth already pursed and petulant. So infuriating…

"If you didn't leave a mess at his office, where did you leave it?" Will asks frowning even more.

"I left no mess anywhere."

Will rubs at his chin. Hannibal is not lying about the mess but neither is he being especially candid about it either. Will glances at Daniel, the usually calm field of green is flecked with steely flint and his expression is equally cold. He decides to ask questions Hannibal might actually deign to answer…directly.

“Who sent her to Daniel’s office?”

“Agamemnon. From her lips to my ear. She was intending to tattle on you and Doctor Clayton. The doomed Cassandra of our age.”

Will nods as Hannibal confirms his suspicions. Not surprising that Hannibal managed to find a role in his *Iliad* for Lounds. “What did you do with our erstwhile prophetess…exactly?”

“Sent her to the temple of Apollo, where else?”

“That’s…not an answer.”

“It’s the answer I am prepared to give. How does it feel to ponder the fate of Freddie Lounds?”

“Ironic.” Will sighs and shrugs, wanders away from the table as he speaks. “A little tit for tat? You aren’t still sore about that, are you?”

“A little. I know you are.”

The dark luminous eyes trail slowly over his frame to hover at his midriff and Will shudders as those eyes wash over him. He bites his tongue to ground him, to remind him the creature squatting in the corner is not really there. At the moment, the imminent confrontation with Mason monopolizes Will thoughts and he shutters thoughts of Lounds, shoves them back into the gutters of his mind. It would appear her incendiary brand of journalism has been extinguished.

He offers Hannibal a bitter smile nodding as he retreats, mentally pivots, and fires back. “Did you gloat, just a little, when you undressed me for the tableau?”

The hooded eyes narrow as Hannibal remembers brushing his lips across the ruined flesh while Will had lain unconscious in his bed at the villa. He had been hallucinating, lost in the fire of his imagination, uttering fragments of fevered dreams and frenzied fantasy. Will remembers only the hallucinations. He will never remember lying on that bed or the tenderness he had inspired.

Will’s anger runs deep and the wound bleeds still. Venting that anger would do him a world of good and Hannibal will grant Will his chance. Will needs to channel that anger at Mason first, however. Hannibal does not doubt there will be plenty left for him. Patience.

“Did God gloat when he cast Adam from his garden?” Hannibal responds evenly.

Tension hangs unrequited, dense like fog though nothing more than words and a glance have passed between Hannibal and Will. Daniel feels the affection between the two of them as bluntly as being struck with a club, desire as warm as the delicious rub between his legs and yet their words fly like arrows, sharply pointed and aimed to injure. And Daniel marvels that they are, each of them, enjoying it immensely.

Still, Hannibal is here to do more than gloat.

“This is a surprise,” Daniel says into air practically popping with pressure, “Seeing you twice in the same day. You might have called Will since you did return his phone.” Daniel says slipping sweaty hands into unbelievably tight pockets. Fingers curl into the fabric shrinking from the penetrating gaze that somehow rips away from Will.

“Will and I agreed it would be prudent I keep an eye on him.” Hannibal says with just a hint of suggestiveness that sends Will to prickling all over.

Daniel’s head snaps in Will’s direction, lips parted to speak but the words won’t come. Will catches the florid flash of green and shakes his head waving a finger for emphasis. Leave it to Hannibal to be so literal.

“This is not…what I imagined keeping an eye on me looked like.” Will says, finger retreating into hand and hand into a fist he clenches at his side.

“Seems your imagination took a holiday. You used to be better at this, Will.” Hannibal chides.

Bach’s dulcet duet still plays, the violins hum point and counterpoint as memories and associations merge into a singular melody and Will sees the whiskey soaked moments in the salon. He also remembers this piece playing during the bittersweet exchange between them as Will had climbed out of Hannibal’s bed to drive back to Wolf Trap that last time, knowing he would never lie down in that bed again.

That melody you hear, Will. An unfinished symphony, the ink still wet…

Stolen moments sequestered in their private sanctuary and Will thinks Hannibal is signaling something similar now. Hannibal would not have gone through the trouble of preparing food if he did not intend to enjoy it. He has carved out a comfortable nook from which to carry out his reconnaissance and to continue composing their symphony. Hannibal is here because the threat has moved to Daniel’s house. How Hannibal knows this is a mystery, but the attention to detail indicates Hannibal expects a return on his investment.

The selection of a duet is not incidental, nor is the significance lost on Will. Though there are three places set at the table, this is a continuation of their dinner date.

We have agreed to use our ideals of each other to frame our discussion and guide the narrative of our...

Courtship?

Is that what we are doing?

Will looks to Daniel, the worry etched into the creases around his eyes and forehead probably a mirror of Will’s own face. The significance has not been lost on Daniel, either.

“There must be a reason to merit the intrusion.” Daniel says.

He knows he can’t kick up a fuss with a freezer full of Luciano downstairs and Hannibal’s announcement he is here to watch over Will. Daniel wants Hannibal to rescue Will from the Paolini and though this is not what he had in mind, he can’t complain when the devil answers his prayers. Or when he fixes dinner. The devil lifts luminous dark eyes to his face and Daniel feels a disorienting shudder of warmth filter through frazzled nerves.

“Enough reason to pick your lock.” The devil purrs, “Given the circumstances, it is highly unlikely the Paolini will come here.”

“What circumstances?” Will asks, fingers trailing along the barrel of his Beretta.

“Mason’s website is under construction.”

Hannibal watches Will and Daniel exchange glances. “Which means the FBI got into it or Mason has suspended activity on it.” Will says.

Hannibal nods. “I called yesterday and an actual person answered. This afternoon, the number was no longer in service.”

“The tableau this morning changed things.”

Hannibal neither confirms nor denies Will’s statement, another sin of omission committed, and another necessary deception. Neither expects truth to spill from the other’s lips; they agreed only to no outright lies. Will needs only to know the Paolini are not going to accost him at Daniel’s home this evening; he does not need to know why the Paolini are not coming. Will is far too clever as it is and advance information about this evening’s festivities will spoil what need to be his spontaneous and honest reactions.

“If I were the Paolini, I might sit back and allow the Polizia to do the heavy lifting.” Hannibal says. “My presence here indicates there is no legitimate security detail.”

“When we left the hospital we were promised protection.” Daniel says.

“Promised by whom?” The inquiry is leveled at Will. “The lovely Detective D’Angelo? She certainly makes the rounds.”

Hannibal casts a glance to Clayton. The emerald eyes glitter back at him, cool and hard. The little mouse knows he was also observed nibbling the native delights at the Uffizi . Clayton, predictably quickly shifts his gaze to Will. Watching cub and mouse interact is positively delightful…and edifying.

“She is aware of her boss’s corruptibility. He sent her to the hospital …to observe but not intervene.”

“Agamemnon sent another lieutenant.”

“With unrealistic instructions.” Will sighs, “If the Trojans have retreated, he’ll be forced to make a move himself.”

“Will, if she calls about a security detail, he will be notified.” Daniel says, “Whatever she set up…”

“He’ll countermand it. Select his own. But it will take time to do that. If he intends to grab me here at your house, he will do that himself. Quietly and under the guise of authority. He’ll want the cover of night.”

“Plenty of time for dinner. Who’s hungry?” Hannibal says, tossing the dishtowel over one shoulder.

Daniel cringes inside at the thought. He’s not sure how to navigate this indelicate impasse. He ruffles Bella’s ears as she paces.

“The dogs need to go out. It’s reasonably safe to walk them?” Daniel looks to Will who nods, agreeing the dogs should go out and Daniel with them. Daniel knows why.

Tension oozes from Will like blood from an open wound, outwardly calm but inside him the conflict rages. The source of his inferno's flames burns brightly before them and Will basks in its warmth while dancing around it so as not to get too close. Will prefers the flames focus on him. The flames will not follow Daniel outside.

"As safe as any other day. Don't wander too far. You are welcome to join us at the table." Hannibal lifts a finger in the direction of the set table.

"To partake of body and blood, Daniel." Will says, "Sacrament."

"*Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you*. All the elements present awaiting the act of communion." Hannibal agrees.

"Of course the devil quotes scripture." Will says.

"Without sin, there would be no need for religion." Hannibal scoffs. "A convenient concept, sin. Satan knows the verses as well as God."

"How else to perform his alchemy of truth and lies?" Will's lips peel back, more sneer than smile.

"It would seem his apprentice is equally well versed." The devil says chidingly with raised brow. "And resumed his ritual of communion. As I remember, *you* brought the sacrifice to the garden."

"This…isn't good for him." Will demurs, nodding at Daniel.

"It's good enough for you." Hannibal says simply.

Daniel pauses in his petting, Bella's ears momentarily forgotten. He looks back and forth between the two of them. Conduction, Daniel thinks as the air around him seems to surge with electricity. The colliding forces in front of him send a visceral charge he feels along his skin, as though struck by a hot wire. His shield is useless with these two, the barrier between he and Will has already become a fluid thing and with Hannibal in the room, the emotions flow in a constant stream.

Will feels feathers fold along his shoulders and he shudders with the weight. The luminous dark eyes seem to devour every scrap of him and Will feels scraped raw to his bones. He touches fingers tentatively to his shirt and as the fabric slides across his skin he catches Daniel wince as though his own hand had triggered the tremor crossing Daniel's pensive face.

"It's an unholy communion." Daniel says. "A corruption of a sacred act, sanctity has become another malleable concept."

"You've already partaken." Hannibal says, "But if the taste is not to your liking, *sanctuary* is sufficient."

"Sanctuary is granted though I'll decline Mephistopheles' feast."

Feeling the burden of responsibility that comes with being the anchor, Daniel walks past Hannibal into his kitchen and opens a drawer to remove a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He draws a cigarette out before stuffing the wrinkled pack into a pocket. The cigarette dangles from his fingers as he contemplates the contents in his sauté pan.

Hannibal watches as Daniel hovers over the stove unable to resist sniffing the aroma of sizzling meat though his fingers nervously knead the plastic lighter. Tactile manifestations of conflicted thoughts; his own and Hannibal suspects Will's. Perhaps not thoughts exactly, but Clayton's association with Will affects him. Already physically similar, he is becoming more like Will all the time and Will is desperately dependent upon the ballast Clayton provides as his ship careens toward its destination. Hannibal thinks Clayton's metaphor perfectly describes their relationship. Will has to know he is dragging his anchor with him. Does Clayton?

Clayton clenches his lighter and Hannibal waits for the tongue that invariably slips out wetting lips with the eruption of saliva from Daniel's well of primordial associations.

"Smell and taste are the most primal of the senses often evoking ancestral memory and emotion." Hannibal says.

"The human instinct to hunt?" Daniel looks up from the pan.

"Hunting is a primitive instinct. As instinctual as survival."

"Not all instincts survive evolution." Daniel says turning from the stove, cigarette now caught between supple lips.

"Apparently not." Hannibal says dryly. "Instincts can become vestigial, useless like the appendix but when provoked become potentially lethal if left unattended."

"Nature can be cruel." Daniel pauses to light his cigarette, "Extinction by selection or survival by superiority. Nature often scatters the vestiges of her structures among her creations."

"Perhaps in your case, not so vestigial after all." Hannibal concedes with a toss of his head and a serpentine smile as the smoke from Daniel's cigarette affronts his nose.

Will's little mouse is proving resilient and does not quake before the lion. The stubborn spark he always welcomes in Will's eyes is mirrored in the glittering green ones. Clayton remains the jewel Will keeps close, perhaps too close.

"He has no appetite for tasting the delights of *Faust*'s Walpurgis Nights." Will says tracing his thumb along the sleek barrel of the Beretta once again.

"*On my own behalf too I'm here…"* Hannibal quotes from Goethe's poem, angling his head at Daniel. "*… but I don't know anything better than each to seek among the fires the adventure he desires*."

"*A wild friend for the other to show the way and both amusing Zeus with their display*?" Will taunts.

"*You think a guest's nails can't claw every bit as sharply as those talons of yours?*"

Hannibal considers the curious tic his words bring to Will's eyes. Will bites his lip and draws the tender flesh inside as he stares at Hannibal in brooding silence. Hannibal thinks he has plucked a sensitive nerve and by the way Will blinks himself back into the moment, Will knows the nerve plucking was noticed.

"*You'll only stay until you leave our company, yourself, as you will*." Daniel says.

He sucks on his cigarette, a little unnerved by Hannibal's ability to tap into Will's subconscious as though Will's hallucinations hang before his eyes, suspended specters given form from his lies.

Daniel has some idea of the creatures sharing the room with Will, the ones in his head and the one standing in front of him.

"*Looked at above you are …rather appetizing.*"

Hannibal proffers a gentle jest for the little mouse as he wraps the delectably soft lips around his cigarette. The lips Hannibal wouldn't mind tasting again draw on the filter and release it in a slow pucker as Clayton stares back at him, mind too focused on the multiple inferences to appreciate his own contribution. Clayton's tongue had slid like wet silk around Hannibal's mouth at his office this morning and Hannibal has not forgotten losing himself in that mouth. Hannibal decides neither has Clayton as the distressed doctor sucks again on the slender cigarette.

"Are you sure you won't join us…at the table?" Hannibal clarifies.

Will stands quietly, expression somber but otherwise unreadable. It occurs to Daniel that Will is as curious as Hannibal about what he will do. His head spins as he wonders who has been analyzing whom. Is this what hunting looks like? Or is this the invitation Hannibal was talking about?

The smoke drifts, white tendrils curling beneath the ceiling fan and Daniel looks to one and then the other, the infernal demon and the infernal angel. He is trapped in a snare of temptations more seductive than anything he has ever known.

"Our communion and truce was interrupted last night, Will." Hannibal is saying, "Do you have Hector's blade?"

"Right here."

Will's left hand curls behind his back. Daniel flinches and reminds himself to breathe before Will notices. Too late. Will's eyes flick in his direction as he retrieves Hannibal's knife wedged at the top of his trousers.

"Do you have Ajax's belt?" Will holds Hannibal's gaze.

"In my bag. We still agree to set armor and wounds aside?"

"And weapons." Will says for Daniel's benefit.

Will steals a reassuring glance at Daniel as he slips Ajax's knife from the waistband of his trousers and sets it beside the Beretta. "I don't think anyone is going to stab me with a syringe this evening."

"An unfortunate encounter we should revisit." Hannibal says.

Daniel's blood quickens at the mention of the belt, no less for its proximity. Though the belt is his, it is now laced with symbolism and portents of disaster and he does not want it back. Knowing Hannibal has brought it into his home rattles him. He should be more comforted that Will is here, a comfort conveyed in Will's glance and subtle smile, but Daniel is not comforted as much as he could be.

He wants to hear more of what happened at Hannibal's villa. He wants to know what Hannibal did with Freddie Lounds. He imagines Hannibal and Will have a lot to talk about over dinner, but Daniel also recognizes the need to escape and regroup before he can join them at the table. Daniel can provide Hannibal his sanctuary and reprise his role of therapist for both of them. Playing the objective observer suits Daniel just fine and doing so absolves him of…participating.

Cara's tail catches his trousers and as Daniel bends stiff knees to sink his fingers into her soft black fur sunlight streams from the window causing him to squint. The promise of a respite in the fresh flowers of his garden prevails.

"I won't be gone long." Daniel says walking to the back door and grabbing the leashes from one of the hooks on the wall. "Try to behave until I get back."

He looks into pale blue eyes first. A weary wrinkling of brows and a nod from Will is all he needs before turning to push open the screened door to let the dogs outside. He offers a quick nod to Hannibal on his way out and the current of heat along his back persists long after the door has closed behind him.

Will paces in the living room while Hannibal stands at the edge of the carpet, feet not quite breaching the woven braids of Italian wool for the moment allowing Will his space. They watch Daniel from their respective vantage points as he ambles along the terraces until he descends into brick and stone with the dogs at his side, lost among the tiered flora that line Fiesole's hills.

The trepidation Will feels dissipates as Daniel descends, thoughts of his white winged ally wandering among the ruins of his inferno fill his head. He knows Daniel is not in any immediate danger this evening. Hannibal is still curious about him, curious about their relationship, and embedded within Hannibal's curiosity is forbearance of a sort. He turns his attentions to the more immediate conundrum that is Hannibal.

They are alone and the kitchen seems to Will to shrink, the air crackles between them in the void left by Daniel. Will glances at his Beretta remembering Hannibal taking it from his hands last night. He remembers many fragments of last night, but like so much of his universe, last night feels like a distant dream, another hallucination. He concedes that most of his evening was comprised of one hallucination after another. Will can almost convince himself it never happened, but for the insufferably self-satisfied presence beside him and the cuts of seared meat in the pan and what must be a meat pie in the oven.

There is, of course, the sobering effect of waking up this morning staked to the ground naked as the day he was born surrounded by a throng of law enforcement, let's not forget that. Or that Hannibal undressed him while he was drugged…again. The bath, however, was something new… Will thinks he would like a glass of that Chianti. He looks over Hannibal's shoulder and locates a familiar green bottle. Maybe whiskey would be better…

Hannibal walks back to the stove and he does not need to turn his head to know Will trails behind him; they are a succession of notes so much in accord they move as one. Habits. Conditioning. Will takes up his usual place at the counter beside him and Hannibal angles his head toward the pleasant tapping of fingers as Will considers the bottle of Glenlivet single malt scotch Hannibal has set on the counter. For him.

A second later Will is reaching into the cabinet and pulling out a short tumbler. He pauses and looks to Hannibal who nods appreciatively and Will grabs another, sets them down and pours two glasses, two fingers full. Hannibal is already raising his glass as Will lifts his. Their eyes meet as they drink and Will feels horribly good. Standing here alone with him in a kitchen with drink in hand feels so natural and Will has missed this. Has missed the way those dark eyes are looking at him right now. Even knowing Hannibal purposely placed the bottle there to put the suggestion in his head that too…is natural for them.

Hannibal swallows the fine scotch slowly, savoring its barley honey sweetness that summons the same flavors he remembers sipping from crystal in his salon and smelling this wonderful smell that fills his nose, his entire being. He leans a fraction closer, the need to touch so strong that a simple pass along Will's sleeve would suffice but the invasion of his space proves too much. Will skitters away to rest his elbows on the center island instead, fingers seeking tactile sensation to hold him in the moment. He takes his comforts from tracing circles in the discarded flour that covers the countertop.

Hannibal sets down his glass by the stove and resumes his preparations. So infuriating…his Will. The smoke from Clayton's cigarette lingers as Clayton surely intended. With one simple act, Clayton reasserted his dominance effectively countering Hannibal's presence in his kitchen at least temporarily and he reinforced his presence, leaving Will with a visceral reminder in the wake of his departure. Hannibal sniffs the air loudly for emphasis before he speaks.

"Emotional, isn't he?" Hannibal queries while reaching for the bottle of cooking sherry.

Steam billows with a hiss as Hannibal pours the sherry and shakes the pan over the flames. A long sigh escapes Will and he clears his throat, thoughts gathered so he can selectively unpack them and spread them out before Hannibal. He does not want to discuss his little mouse with Hannibal, but there are certain realities that Will must face sooner or later. Clayton fuels the fires of his inferno as much as Hannibal.

"Casting stones already?" Will says without looking up, entranced by the trails his fingers make in the film of flour.

"His perception is abetted by a gift not unlike your own." Hannibal says.

"A gift you helped yourself to. He's not…your therapist." Will flicks the flour destroying his little circles.

"On the contrary, I told Freddie Lounds that's exactly what he was."

Will's head jerks up from the tracks of flour; mouth opened and tongue tickling his incisors. It is an expression Hannibal cannot elicit enough. Turnabout is fair play and where Freddie Lounds is concerned Hannibal thinks this especially apropos. He has no intention of clarifying the whereabouts of the luckless Miss Lounds. Let Will stew about that for a while. Hannibal certainly did.

"Exactly…what did you tell her?" Will says thinking that it does not matter at this point.

"That I was engaging in couples' therapy. She of course noticed that you weren't there and I think questioned my integrity at that point."

Will's mouth drops open at the audacity, the lunacy of saying such a thing to Freddie Lounds. Jaws snap shut as he glances at the sauté pan and wonders where the butchering took place. He hopes she died happy in the knowledge she had been right all along. As it is, Hannibal should have left Daniel out of it.

"You told me I have to let my imago of him go. Was involving him your way of helping me do that?"

"While opportunity presented itself to observe the good doctor wrestle with his conscience, I did not contrive the circumstances. I manipulated circumstances to my advantage. Manipulation is something you understand very well, Will."

"Daniel is not a mouse in your maze."

"Isn't he? He is certainly lost in yours. I commend you on your work so far. He barely hesitated to send Lounds upstairs. He handled her masterfully." Hannibal pauses, struck with a realization so obvious he is surprised he had not thought of it before.

"He can't help it, can he?"

Clouds gather behind the sea of blue and Will looks aside, clearly avoiding Hannibal and not caring that Hannibal knows it.

"Compulsive empathizing, just like you." Hannibal prompts.

"Not…just like me. But he is affected by what he feels. I can't protect him from what is part of him."

"Not much luck keeping him at arm's length?"

Will's mouth crumbles as teeth sink into lips. He leans on the island counter, chin resting on hands, a thoughtful gesture and Will's way of acknowledging Hannibal's double entendre.

"You sent him mixed messages at his office this morning. Geometry with straws and shades of Hector."

"Not mixed messages, multiple possibilities. He won't walk away, Will. Too much chemistry between you. Complimentary elements. Potassium chloride regulates the beating of the heart but the same compound is used in lethal injections."

"You think the compound too concentrated?"

"I think the association of the elements beneficial…so far. Separating them may prove difficult."

"Separation can be painful." Will agrees.

"Much less so if abrupt."

Hannibal nods at the bowl of chopped Italian ham on the other side of the counter next to Will and Will passes it to him, leaving his finger along its edge just long enough for Hannibal to graze his skin. Will's eyes soften immediately as his hand slips away, the incandescence is gone too quickly and the longing rips through Hannibal's chest anew.

"Sometimes better that way." Will says almost to himself.

"The taste is still too sweet. You may have to sour the milk." Hannibal wonders if they are still talking about Clayton.

Silence falls thick and cold like snow between them. Will drifts in the snow, fixating on the flour, fascinated with his fingernails. Hannibal removes the pan from the flame, sets it aside and turns off the burner. Hannibal drifts for a moment, too. Hannibal knows his wayward cub is not yet committed to the sacrifice he contemplates. Still undecided and indifferent. Will remains unpredictable. He will not know what he wants until circumstances provide him with inspiration. Or, convince him of the futility.

“Achilles and Patroclus prepare for Agamemnon and Troy.” Hannibal says after a moment steeped in silence and discomfiture. “A battle to test their friendship.”

Hannibal’s voice draws Will’s gaze from the charred gloom of his inferno. He thinks of the epic narrative that frames their agreement and his fear is that despite his best intentions Hannibal may escape the fate he has planned for both of them. Daniel would be the first casualty to feel his rage.

“That is our agreement.” Will says without looking up.

“Has Patroclus put on his armor?”

“He will. Achilles stands beside him already wearing his. And now Hector…” Will glances out the screened door, “conveniently has Ajax’s belt?”

“As Patroclus conveniently has Achilles’ blade. To wield as he will.”

“Wrathful Achilles, ever aware of that inconvenient heel.” Will says peeking over his glass.

“Impetuous Patroclus, whose armor does he wear?” Hannibal glowers back as he pours more scotch down his throat. “He should remember his actions will determine whether Hector is left with his dogs or to his dogs.”

“Hedging your bets with threats?”

“You think Achilles does not know Patroclus’ heart? Orchestrations of carbon, a symphony unfinished, the ink still wet. Betrayal or forgiveness.”

“To the truth then. And all its consequences.” Will salutes Hannibal with his glass.

Will takes a galvanizing gulp from the tumbler, pleased with himself as much as the taste, mildly surprised his hand doesn’t shake, and walks from behind the counter. His fingers find his upper lip to stroke at the whiskers, the touching igniting associations of another’s fingers gently stroking there whilst the memory of a pair of crazed blue eyes had blinked at his tormentors through a haze of hallucinogens.

I lit a fire outside for the chair…I’ll get started on the carpet. It will be dark soon.

We should wait until dark to transport him, yes.

Oh…he’s already been transported. When he returns to himself his body will not be the only thing that has changed.

I disagree. Mason’s body is the only part of him susceptible to transformation.

He’ll want revenge. Revenge is a very transformative emotion.

Revenge is akin to anger. A prompt to action. To injure the one who injured you is merely another of those gifts from our ancestors.

Mason's going to have to find someone to do his dirty work.

Poor Mason. Who will collect the tears for his martinis now?

Will had been kneeling on the floor, the carpet knife held tightly between thickly gloved fingers as Hannibal's hands had curled beneath his chin while he had tugged at his ruined carpet, slick with blood and reeking of the bodily fluids that had soaked through the bottom of the chair. Mason had lain but a few feet away, humming along to the Beethoven sonata Hannibal had made a point of playing, unable to resist the *charm* of Will's turntable.

Mason had stared right at them while he had hummed, head lolling to the side and wild eyes blinking in that ravaged face as Hannibal had stroked his thumb across Will's lips and, ignoring the pointed twisting of Will's shoulders, had swept insistent fingers across his whiskers coaxing shudders Will remembers vividly. Carpet knife still clenched in his right hand, he had drawn Hannibal close with the other.

Hannibal…

Will.

Mason is going to skin them alive.

"What's for dinner?" he huffs leaning down to peek into the oven. "Lamb or pig?...or both?"

Hannibal clicks on the oven light so Will can see the pie and every tousled hair on his head is illuminated the mane of curls maddeningly touchable. Will inhales, lingers a moment before standing straight once again. He folds his arms over his chest and the arched brows rise expectantly, demanding an answer.

"Tsk. Tsk. Leave a little drama for the table." Hannibal tuts softly.

Hannibal arranges the seared slices of the tender meat he had carved from Ruggerio's back. They glisten with the reduced glaze and the aroma fills the air. Will's nostrils flare with the scent before he turns away to resume his stance by the counter, cautiously maintaining his precious distance as the barking of the dogs trumpets Hector's approach.

Will walks to the door to greet Daniel who is in for his penny, in for his pound to be sure. He decides Hannibal will not be denied his dinner theatre this evening and he is stuck playing along. So is Daniel. Will hopes Daniel thinks he is playing along. Will is not quite sure he is playing along or not. He is sure about Hannibal. Hannibal…is always playing.

Bella and Cara lay at Daniel's feet under the table that seems smaller tonight, the polished wood barely visible there are so many plates assembled upon it. And there are the personalities assembled around it. Hannibal sits at the head of the table, he and Will on either side of him, the placement neither incidental nor open to negotiation. Hannibal had only to incline his head and lower his eyes for Will to assume his seat to Hannibal's right.

It is a most intimate gathering. Daniel is slathered with emotion, the residue so thick it floats like another layer of skin. Will is like a faucet, alternately twisting off into one his retreats only to return a gushing torrent of agitation and anticipation. Hannibal's heat burns bright behind the cool exterior, an insidious flame that licks at his mind, a pervasive chill that creeps into his bones.

The subtle and silent messages passed between them are likely incalculable, a complicated language entirely their own where the unspoken conveys as much as the spoken, where a pause or a glance speak more loudly than words. For Daniel, it is both frustrating and fascinating to realize that Will and Hannibal can carry on a private conversation while he sits at the table with them. He thinks Jack Crawford had not understood what was taking place under his own nose until it was too late. If in fact Crawford had ever picked up on it at all.

Cara's paw rakes impatiently at his sandals and Daniel looks down at her and shakes his head. He usually tosses the girls morsels from his plate, but this evening the occasional whining emphatically expresses their displeasure at being denied the expected treats. Daniel suspects they were treated enough before he got home. He steals a glance at Hannibal and stabs a chunk of fresh tomato.

Hannibal slides a slice of the fresh baked pie onto the plate Will holds out. His expression is bland but the pale blue eyes shine with the wicked sheen that accompanied last evening's Sardinian supper. Whether or not the gleam is manufactured for Hannibal's benefit does not matter. Will does not need to convince Hannibal. He needs to convince himself.

"This…isn't pork." Will says staring down at his plate.

"No. Tell me what you think after you taste it."

Will cuts through his slice with his fork and promptly takes a healthy portion between his lips. He draws the fork slowly from his mouth eyes on Hannibal the entire time. The delight he experiences watching Will eat is indescribable. He waits until Will has swallowed before taking a bite of his own.

"I taste organ meat." Will says, "Kidney…and…."

Understanding glistens in the sea of blue, the fork hangs in the air like the unfinished sentence.

"Spinach?" Hannibal says softly.

"The sacrificial lamb made it to the table." Will says flatly.

"How does he taste?"

Will hears the clink of metal upon the ceramic plate and does not need to look at Daniel to know he just dropped his fork. He rolls his eyes and stares into the bemused face to his left.

"The taste is mild, simple."

"Grain-fed lamb does have a muted flavor." Hannibal says, tone tinged with regret. "I suspect our lamb lived a plain and simple life."

"Needed spice and the tang of the fruit to accompany it."

"All the way to heaven. Sacrifice becomes saint." Hannibal swallows another blissful mouthful.

“Most saints do live simple lives…until their martyrdom.” Daniel says quietly.

“Detective Ruggerio was made a martyr in the line of duty. Died for his religion. Keats wrote that love was his religion and he could die for that. Could you?”

“A hypothetical question can only elicit a hypothetical answer. No one knows what they are capable of until the situation is no longer hypothetical.” Daniel says reaching for his wine.

Will tips his glass to Daniel. Encouragement for the long haul. Hannibal will not sling softballs all evening; he’s just getting warmed up. Will nods to the plate of glazed sliced meat in the center of the table, “Shoulder cuts?” he asks as Daniel winces across from him.

“*Agnello alla Fiorentina,* a simple but elegant sauté with sliced pancetta.” Hannibal gestures to the plate of arranged slices garnished with fresh parsley and sage from Daniel’s garden. “And the kidney pie is from the kitchens of the Medici.”

Will sets down his fork and holds up his wine glass in salute. Hannibal lifts his glass as well. Will stares at the shimmering Chianti swirling in his glass and he sees blood. He watches his flock of ravens descend outside on the patio and knows the scrape of talons along the bricks will soon follow.

“To Saint Angelo.” Hannibal says, taking a sip from his glass.

“To murder and mercy. Apparently we make them and saints, too.” Will tips his glass and his mouth is swimming in thick Chianti.

“*I felt for the tormented whirlwinds damned for their carnal sins committed when they let their passions rule their reason*.” Daniel says.

Will holds the glass to his lips but does not take another drink. Daniel has thrown a dart and Will waits to see where it lands. The damned whirlwinds are he and Hannibal. Their carnal sin is the slaying of the sacrifice and its subsequent consummation.

“No solace for Dante’s whirling spirits only his pity. Pity for the devil, Doctor Clayton?” Hannibal sets down his glass, lips puckering with the tart tannins.

“Have some sympathy and some taste?” Daniel says, lifting large green eyes to Will.

“As heads is tails, just call me Lucifer ‘cause I’m in need of some restraint.” Will says softly from his side of the table, though he doubts Hannibal will heed the transparent warning.

Predictably, Hannibal raises a brow and his fork. “I am familiar with that ditty. Mick Jagger read Goethe, cheered for Mephistopheles and despised Faust as much as I.”

“Wasn’t it Blake who said to cherish pity lest you drive an angel from your door?” Daniel says.

“There’s no room for pity at this table.” Will says. “Nor angels.”

Daniel averts his gaze and stabs another vinaigrette soaked hunk of tomato. Agreeing with Hannibal pains Will and Daniel can practically feel his heart contract. The weight of the burden it carries settles deep within Daniel’s chest. But, Daniel is not sure for whom that heart weeps.

He turns his attention to Hannibal who dabs at his mouth with a napkin clearly annoyed he wipes the pampered lips with wood pulp instead of satin. Daniel had not been in a particularly acquiescent mood when Hannibal had inquired about table linens. His mood has not improved, either.

Hannibal crinkles the simple white napkin between his fingers and frowns at the paper product he crushes in his hand. The appraising glint in the green eyes gazing at him suggests there are soft linen tablecloths and napkins secreted somewhere within Clayton's domicile. Classic passive aggressive behavior designed to provoke is petty but the little mouse is entitled to his amusements.

Wills sits tormented with his dark hallucinations. He lifts another forkful of the tender crisp pastry to his lips, the coiled thing inside a constant distraction. The meal is simple yet delicious and Hannibal's resourcefulness never fails to astound, the tanginess of apples and the zest of oranges bursts on his tongue.

The presentation is equally simple. This is not Hannibal's villa and indulging his passion for extravagant centerpieces is not possible. Will is certain the meal itself contains plenty of embedded meaning and it is only a matter of time before Hannibal gets around to indulging another of his passions; reciting the anecdotal history associated with the food. Hannibal seems more than a little preoccupied with the Medici and Will thinks he knows the reason for that.

Daniel continues to munch on his fresh salad topped with canned tuna fish as Will and Hannibal dine on the dubious delicacies laid out on his table. The full litany of ingredients has yet to be disclosed, but the uncertainty lies in the ingredients' attribution. Apparently, Ruggerio had provided the meat for the pie but Lounds' contribution remains a mystery. He is consumed with the possibility that prized pieces of her adorn his plates.

"What inspired the pie?" Daniel asks.

Hannibal dips his nose into his wine glass obviously pleased with the inquiry and himself. Will ignores the clicking of claws behind his chair, knows the persistent scratching is not the scuffing of the canine paws beneath the table.

"It is a variation on a mince pie, a two hundred year old recipe based on a similar recipe from the Renaissance period attributed to the house of Medici. The pie was served at the wedding of Guglielmo Pazzi and Bianca d'Medici."

"It tastes floral." Will says.

"Your palate grows more sophisticated all the time. Rosewater enhances the floral notes already present in the cinnamon and honey."

"Sweetens the meat."

"Quite." Hannibal agrees, "I endeavored to make the sacrifice as palatable as possible."

"Easier to swallow. A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." The tone is markedly tart as Will takes up his wine glass again.

"*And my soul tasted that heavenly food…giving new appetites while it satiates.*" Hannibal says, lifting a forkful of pie. "Perhaps Dante dined on something similar while writing his *Divine Comedy*."

“Dante was alluding to the taking of communion, not…your pie.” Will says with a droll pursing of lips. “*They that eat me shall yet be hungry.*”

“*And they that drink me shall yet be thirsty.* The taking of communion is a rite of initiation.” The blonde brows rise provocatively.

“By commemorating an act of redemption”. Will waves his fork.

“Redemption requires sacrifice.”

“Communion is a remembrance of that sacrifice.”

Will stabs at a slice of Saint Angelo and proceeds to section it on his plate. Daniel watches in stunned silence as Hannibal follows suit, taking a glazed slice of sautéed flesh for himself.

“A renewal of vows. Accepting God as one’s savior. As absolution requires forgiveness.” Hannibal says, taking up his knife.

“To be saved is to be forgiven.”

Will slips another slice of the pancetta laden sacrifice slowly between lips glossed with glaze. Hannibal thinks his toes might curl if Will continues to indulge his oral fixation so flagrantly.

“Redemption requires two entities. One cannot redeem himself.” Hannibal dabs delicately at his mouth with the detested paper napkin.

“The act of communion is an acknowledgment of that forgiveness.”

“And a promise to go and sin no more.” Hannibal says leaning back in his chair, fingers triangulated in a temple above his plate, a mockery of a prayer.

Daniel is not sure what just happened in the rapid fire exchange he just witnessed. Both Will and Hannibal seem satisfied but Daniel can see no clear winner. After a moment he thinks this is how it usually ends between them. He realizes that what just happened is but a sample of the game they play. Neither of them gave in, neither blinked, and no pieces on the board moved.

Will and Hannibal are dining on Ruggerio and only Ruggerio, the martyred Saint Angelo of Florence. The meal laid out on his table looks exactly like a petite banquet Dante or the Medici would enjoy. Hannibal’s attention to aesthetics speaks to a singular theme and he did not mix metaphors here. There is no ginger at the table.

Daniel thinks Will must have questioned Hannibal about Lounds by now and decides to risk being rude by daring to ask a direct question. His curiosity is killing him.

“What did you do with Miss Lounds after I left?” Daniel looks to Hannibal.

Both heads turn in his direction. He receives a patient smile from Hannibal. Will rolls his eyes and drags a knuckle along his stubbly throat.

“Apparently, he sent our red haired Cassandra to Apollo’s temple.” Will says staring at the serpent tailed creature standing behind Daniel, its wings hovering over Daniel’s head.

Daniel ponders the reference as he chews his tuna and lettuce. Like the prophetess from the *Iliad*, Lounds was spilling the beans but nobody was picking them up, except Pazzi. Her stories smacked of innuendo and inferences, sensationalized scenarios embellished for her readers but, despite the tawdriness of the telling, her tales contained truth. Daniel is sure that their modern Cassandra would have warned of the Trojan horse embedded within the FBI too loudly and Hannibal had performed damage control. Like Zeus, he had intervened and whisked Lounds away, changing the narrative and lifting the Temple of Apollo from something else…

Hannibal watches the wheels turn in Clayton's head. Wheels grind in Will's skull, too, though Will is managing too many fronts at the moment to linger long upon Lounds' fate. Will is curious, but it is Clayton who believes he fed her to the lion.

"You seem to have recovered from Du Maurier's cocktail. How do you feel about that?"

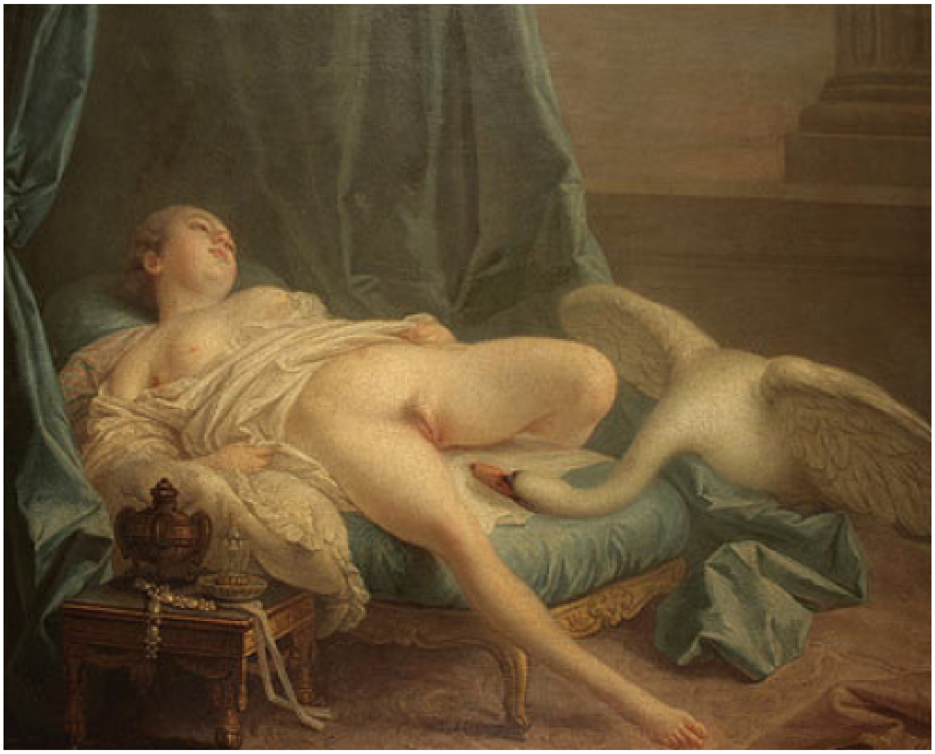
The finely carved face turns to Will and Will turns his head from the creature in the shadows and Daniel. As he studies the proud visage he thinks the speckled stubble along the cheeks and mouth brings out the wildness in Hannibal, the need to conceal the predator within less a concern. Will cannot get used to the long brunette locks now framing the face that haunts him and he considers the imagoes they hold of each other extend to their physical attributes as well. He had suspected as much from Hannibal, but it is somewhat disconcerting to realize the same holds true for him.

As for Du Maurier…

"I think you have a very good idea of how I feel about that." Will counters. "Is she aware…has she seen your…drawings?"

"Some. Did you have any particular ones in mind?" Hannibal prompts, knowing full well to which drawing in particular Will refers.

"Your reinterpretation of the Boucher?"



Leda and the Swan, Francois Boucher

Daniel leans back in his chair with his wine nerves on edge as the emotional tides in the room assault him. He feels Will's ever roiling regret and rage like a slap in the face. He also feels the indulgent affection that settles like a warm confection and he wonders what sort of reimagining could provoke such intense and opposing emotions in Will. Knowing Hannibal as he does, and knowing the significance the myth has for him, he suspects the imagery must have been revealing. Hannibal sits next to him simmering with satisfaction that seems to spread through Daniel like melted butter.

"I was wondering when you might mention that. The original is provocative and I imagine my version was especially so."

Hannibal has no doubt a tapestry of associations hangs in Will's skull and Will has been studying that tapestry from many angles with Clayton's help. Hannibal is counting on those associations to coalesce with the associations from the tableaux, all of them. Hannibal has repeated his message in each one. Will sees the connections in his mind but Will needs to feel them in his heart. As Lucia's eyes had been wrapped inside her heart, Will needs to see with his heart. How else will he find the garden in his inferno? How else will he be moved to forgive?

And throughout all eternity…I forgive you, you forgive me.

"How did you change it?" Daniel asks the visual of Boucher's *Leda and the Swan* permanently seared into his mind.

Hannibal turns to Daniel. "You know the painting?"

"And the myth. We've discussed it." Daniel looks to Will.

"You didn't answer my question. Has she seen it?" Will interrupts unapologetically.

He is not going to describe to Daniel the charcoal version Hannibal had drawn of Boucher's same swan fellating Will, very graphically. And Hannibal is not going to describe it to him either.

"No." comes the terse rely.

"Did you draw a version…for her?"

Hannibal smiles. "No."

Will nods and settles into the chair. Du Maurier has developed her own take on the painting and Hannibal has allowed her to assume an understanding that furthers his agenda and offers a false foundation on which to predicate hers. Masterful.

"Concealing and revealing identities. Eve believes Zeus desires a swan." Will says.

Will has framed the relationship between them using the myth, but he had not realized until their dessert date that Du Maurier was also aware of Hannibal's mythology. Will conjures their conversation, revisits the dining room at Hannibal's villa, aware Hannibal and Daniel watch him retreat into his mind. Will had been wondering about how much of Hannibal's inner universe he had allowed her to see.

You imply a conscious choice to be here…with him. Not persuasion or coercion this time.

Nothing so simple. I merely imply my sense of self sufficiently…separate from his to know the difference.

Survival for the traumatized often involves delusion.

It would appear we can delude ourselves into believing or rationalizing just about anything.

It would appear Du Maurier is correct. The irony is she didn't realize she was taking about herself. Will thinks she does that a lot without realizing it. Hannibal created a faux universe just for Du Maurier. The trouble is the universe he created with Will is just as believable…to Will.

"….though, regrettably, the FBI will once again be in possession of my entire oeuvre." Hannibal is saying.

Will groans. Dealing with Mason is preferable to dealing with Jack once the FBI descends upon Hannibal's villa in Impruneta. If all goes as planned everything else becomes academic. Of course, with Hannibal, nothing ever goes as planned… Will sips at his wine, wets his throat that has become quite dry.

"Well, she's seen enough. Your wanna-be swan pitched a hissy fit in your dining room. Seems a bit obsessive about weeding your garden."

"Bedelia has always been protective."

"Protective of what? Not of you. She had another needle for you, didn't she?"

Hannibal nods.

"She betrayed you, but you let her leave…without nary a scratch." Will waves his hand dismissively.

"Jealous? It's not a betrayal if one expects it." Hannibal says crisply enjoying the exasperated huff from Will.

"You've been orchestrating the betrayal, composing the form it takes since it was coming anyway."

"That would be more accurate."

Hannibal lifts his glass and drinks, eyes Will's perturbed expression from over the rim of his glass. The Chianti is local and potent. A perfect complement to the robust repast they share, a fitting feast to kick off this evening's festivities.

"You like the random element she brings to the board." Will says.

"Du Maurier is hardly a random element. However, she does introduce some spice I find…tasty. Perhaps you'll develop a similar taste. For the spice."

"Not likely. I prefer the spices in my cabinet as they are."

"That's your problem, Will. Always shying away from the zest, playing it safe. How did Uncle Jack like the taste of my tableau?"

“I served it up as you intended. Saint Sebastian was an easier sell than Prometheus. The Classical allusions and lack of…drapery cause him to think too much.”

“Nude corpses are nothing new to Jack.”

“Neither are gift wrapped distractions from you.” Will rubs at his jaw thoughtfully, “I might have caught a cold.”

“It’s summer. The risk to your health was minimal. I imagine the display at sunrise was absolutely stunning.”

Daniel coughs. Will sighs, an audible grunt, shifts uncomfortably in his seat and rolls the pale blue eyes in that way Hannibal adores. So clever…his Will. Even though he had just woken up from his drug induced hallucinations; Will had managed to present the intended narrative to Jack as though he had written it himself. Hannibal is curious what Will inferred from the narrative.

“What did you see?”

“Besides blatant self-indulgence?”

“Yes. Besides that.”

Daniel’s intention at the outset of dinner had been to resume his role of therapist. Instead, he feels more the pilgrim lurking at the fringes of this strange and captivating universe. He lifts his glass only to find it empty and before he can reach for the jug, Hannibal, the attentive host, is already grasping its narrow neck, ready to pour.

Will looks to Daniel and then to Hannibal. Daniel is familiar enough with their universe to appreciate Will’s interpretation. He is intimately involved with them. To disclose to Hannibal his true thoughts serve Will’s purpose. Will inhales deeply, resigned to give to Hannibal the truth. A parting gift as it were. The exchanging of dear and deadly gifts are part and parcel of courtship he supposes.

“I gave Jack Prometheus but I saw Adam chained to his inferno surrounded by a garden he could see and smell but could not touch, left beneath the Tree of Knowledge, to gaze forever at the promise of deliverance from his inferno or to fully accept the gift tucked under his back and grab the keys that would release him.”

“Baudelaire’s verse set you free. How does that make you feel?”

“I feel like I am leaning over a precipice at that precise moment when resistance succumbs to gravity.”

“Perhaps there is a precise moment when you fell. You have never moved beyond that moment.” Hannibal says.

The ache in Daniel’s chest pounds with each heartbeat. He knows where this is leading but Will asked for his help and Daniel gave his word that he would. Will is looking at Hannibal with a quiet kind of awe. Daniel has been telling Will the same thing. Will fears Hannibal knows him better than he knows himself. He fears this because he allowed Hannibal to make a playground of his mind. Each of them can think like the other. They think alike. Alone without each other. Hannibal’s design.

The question remains if Will can forgive him for that.

“In this moment, I am aware that either version of my tableau is possible.” Will says.

“Both are possible.” Hannibal agrees, “But only one of them is true.”

Will stares into his glass, pale blue eyes already swallowed up in the storm brewing all during dinner. Hannibal sighs, stands to clear the table. His appetite has departed and as he looks to Will’s and Clayton’s plates it is apparent they too have had their fill. Will’s capacity for understanding is matched only by his capacity for denial. The cub will have to decide which tale to believe though there is a mountain of evidence before him and he insists on looking down into his inferno instead, convinced he has found the exit. The moment of truth approaches and Hannibal decides to leave Will to muddle through his inferno.

Blinds closed and lights low, Hannibal sits on the overstuffed couch that smells of dog though not unpleasantly so. Clayton’s dogs are well behaved and clean. The house is clean, everything in its place. Clayton is possessed of an aesthetic he can admire. In the brief time Hannibal has been in Clayton’s home the similarities to Will’s home in Wolf Trap become more evident and it is clear he is comfortable here. The furniture and décor have been carefully selected and arranged; Clayton has a sense of style but the attention to utility and comfort are the same as Will’s.

The basement was spotless. Except for the freezer one would never suspect Will had indulged his instincts there. A forensic team would tear the place apart and all the microscopic evidence would come to light, but the same had been true of Hannibal’s house. The devil is in the details. Forensics aside, Will had ensured Clayton’s basement would withstand casual scrutiny.

The bedroom they obviously share is…another matter. Hannibal’s talent for observation coupled with his keen sense of smell had evoked images so visceral Hannibal had consciously uncurled his hands before he injured himself. As he sits here now, Clayton beside him on the couch while Will stares stonily from his chair, he thinks the two of them would be upstairs right now if Hannibal had not thoughtfully provided dinner.

Unfortunately, there won’t be a release of those particular tensions in the near future. For any of them. Hannibal looks over at Clayton who immediately becomes preoccupied with the larger dog, Bella he thinks her name is, lying at his feet. He raises a brow as the little black one nuzzles at his shoe laces.

“Agamemnon could show up at any time.” Will says, suddenly back from wherever he was. “We should talk about how to handle this since you’re here to keep an eye on me.”

“An eye for an eye?”

Hannibal gazes into Will eyes and is rewarded with a glimmer of pure defiance. The smile that follows is as inviting as it is wicked.

“He’ll be polite. Ring the doorbell, don’t you think?” Daniel says.

Hannibal blinks at the interruption from the human barometer at his side. Clayton apparently has a problem not only with taste but with atmospheric pressure as well. He is indeed quite emotional and sensitive to his surroundings.

“He won’t prowl around if that’s what you mean.” Will says. “He won’t want to cause a scene. Your house’s location at the top of the hill provides some coverage, but it’s not a guarantee.”

“He doesn’t like you, Will. It’s an opportunity to blow off some steam.” Hannibal says, leaning forward a little, closing the space between them if only by inches.

“I think he’ll have his fun, but we agree the real bloodletting is reserved for Mason’s amusement?”

“That would be my guess.” Hannibal says.

“Just how much bloodletting do you expect?” Daniel asks, his voice seeming to skip an octave. “How can you sit here calmly talking about being tortured?”

“Because it isn’t going to get that far, is it Will?” Hannibal says smoothly.

“That is the hoped for outcome.” Will looks benignly at Hannibal, pools of blue serene and clear. “He won’t want to involve you, Daniel. We should give him that.”

“What do you mean?”

“When he comes, I’ll let him believe you aren’t around. He’ll be direct if he believes there are no witnesses. He sure as hell doesn’t have any idea Hannibal is here.”

“Both of you have talked about this.” Daniel says. “You already have an idea where he might take you.”

“Yes.” Will says.

“Then, why not…plan a sneak attack? Do some reconnaissance or something?”

“Because this is the design.” Will says looking at Hannibal.

“It is.” Hannibal agrees.

Daniel feels the excitement in both of them. They are both looking forward to this, and each for their own reasons. Daniel’s dread is at odds with the near elation he feels from Hannibal. Will’s emotions are more difficult to nail down to the deck of the ship and navigate; they roll wildly about the choppy sea he seems to share with Will.

“Did Menelaus ask for any tests besides the drugs?” Hannibal asks.

“No. He doesn’t want to know with any certainty anything that he might have to act on with any certainty.”

“And Agamemnon?” Hannibal asks with undisguised relish.

“He pushes. He could have been more difficult about my arrest but he doesn’t really want certainty either.”

“He’s insufferably rude.” Hannibal adds.

“Unfailingly so.” Will agrees.

“No time for a meal in the alley; no evidence to collect. Menelaus has to protect you to get what he wants. Agamemnon has to let him protect you to get what he wants.”

“They want you.” Will lifts his eyes to Hannibal’s, digs his fingers into the leather of the chair, caressing creases that crackle with age.

“If they were smart…” Hannibal smiles.

“They’d lock me up.” Will smiles back.

“You’ve had plenty of time to imagine what is in store. What do you imagine the trap looks like?” Hannibal asks.

“Antenor…Mason, is also trapped in a moment he relives over and over and over. His revenge comes from a very dark place. When he woke up from his dream…”

“He was out of his mind.”

“Hard to know what he remembers and what he doesn’t.”

“Assume he remembers everything.” Hannibal says.

“Everything?” Will bites his lip, and closes his eyes.

“Remembers a version of everything he thinks he experienced. You’ve talked to him since. I have not. What do you see when you look at him?”

“If what I see translates into his trap then Achilles and Patroclus had both better pray for divine intervention.”

Hannibal thinks truer words were never spoken. It’s good to be Zeus in your universe.

A phone chirps, the sound muffled between fabric and cushion and all three men reach for their pockets.

“I win.” Will says pulling out his phone, “It’s Jack.”

“Sounds like you lost.” Hannibal says as Will silently shushes him with a wave of his hand.

Daniel wonders how many conversations Will has had with Jack Crawford while Hannibal was either standing, sitting, or lying right beside him that he doesn’t know about. Daniel thinks he will need at least a week to process all that he has witnessed in just the last couple hours. The complexity of their relationship is truly mind boggling.

“Hello, Jack…yes, I can hear you just fine. It’s a nice phone…” Will rolls his eyes. “Thanks. Is it ok if I put you on speaker…for Daniel?”

Brows furrow as Will walks to the window, takes a peek and paces back to his chair. “Okay. Just a sec…”

Will sits down and fumbles with the phone. He curses silently at himself for not inspecting it sooner. It always takes him a while to acclimate. And this thing is brand fucking new…

“If you just…” Daniel begins to rise from his seat.

“Got it.” Will says and offers a grateful grin. “You’re on Jack.”

“I thought you should know I spoke to Mason Verger earlier today. I asked him if he’d made any headway convincing the Paolini to back off.”

“You were walking around the reward.”

“I know he’s behind it and he knows that I know. I can’t accuse him without alienating him and sending him straight to Purnell.”

“You said she knew I was here. That you took me out of protective custody.”

“She thinks I took you out of protective custody two weeks ago.”

“Jack…she doesn’t know Mason bankrolled this whole thing? What does she think his involvement is?”

Hannibal shakes his head at Will. Uncle Jack let his broken pony out of the corral, packed him off to Florence and has been lying about it for months. Hannibal thinks Jack must not be expecting a retirement package. Jack has lost his Bella. He has nothing left to live for. Not even his life. A departure from this life might be merciful.

“He is a victim of Hannibal Lecter and a taxpayer. What else does she need?”

“Well, what else did you talk about?” Will looks to Daniel and Hannibal on the couch. His two universes in orbit. The sense of the surreal stalks his every word. “Did he say the Paolini were backing off?”

“Get this. He says after this morning’s mess at Boboli they want to bury their dead. Let the Polizia start a body count.”

“Interesting.”

“And he took the website down. At least for the moment it is out of commission.”

“The FBI didn’t hack it?”

“Not yet. I don’t know if Mason is telling the truth about any of it, but I thought I should pass it along.”

“I hear you, Jack.”

Will hears Jack loud and clear. He is letting Will know the game is still on and he is going to sit back and see what happens. Jack knows Pazzi or whoever comes for him will take his weapon and phone. Jack must have some other way of keeping in the loop.

“Does Interpol have eyes on Pazzi?”

“And I have eyes on Interpol.”

“Have you heard from Du Maurier?”

“Not yet.”

Will is silent. He looks to Hannibal while he waits. Hannibal merely shrugs. Daniel rubs at his eyes.

“I would tell you if I heard from her, Will. I’m as curious as you to know how Hannibal got hold of the GPS tracker.”

“Yeah…um…do you know where Pazzi is right now?”

“No idea. Is there a security detail there?”

“No idea. What do you think is going to happen, Jack?”

“I think I’m going to receive a call from Inspector Santo at some point and I’ll take it from there. Take care of yourself, Will.”

“Goodnight, Jack.”

Will clicks off the phone and shoves it in his pocket. He likely won’t have this phone very long, no point in playing with it. He slumps into the chair and stretches his legs out, turns his head to look over at the couch.

“That’s it?” Daniel says, almost rising from the couch. “He’s in charge of the FBI manhunt and this is all you get?”

“The fact that Jack has no idea that I am sitting on your couch here in Fiesole can’t possibly instill much confidence.” Hannibal says, looking to Will. “He’s playing all sides.”

“Jack has figured out that he doesn’t need to protect me. You will.”

“I think Jack is washing his hands of you, Will. Jack will be relieved if you survive, but he is only going to send in the clean-up crew. After the fact.”

“Will?” Daniel looks up from the couch and his jaws are so tight Will’s teeth grind in sympathy.

“Hannibal…” Daniel pauses at the grin spreading along Hannibal’s face at hearing Daniel actually utter his name aloud, “…he’s right. That is, I concur. I’ve talked with Jack enough to get the same um…vibe. You must be aware of it.”

“Thank you, Daniel.” Hannibal says. “We’re on our own, Will.”

“Just what you wanted.” Will says.

“Did I? Look around. Who stands in your inferno with you?”

Cara growls from the rug and Bella begins to pace by the doors. Will peeks between the blinds but the front of the house is clear and quiet. He allows his eyes to adjust to the darkness outside and thinks he sees a black sedan further down the road he is certain was not there earlier. Showtime.

“Daniel. You should crate the dogs and disappear upstairs.” Will says as Hannibal picks up his duffle bag.

Daniel looks from Will to Hannibal. He doesn't want to disappear. He blinks back the sting in his eyes and wills himself not to lose it in front of them. The thought that he will not see Will again is incapacitating. This is happening all too quickly and his mind cannot reconcile the torrent of emotions that threaten to become a typhoon.

Will brushes past Hannibal to place his hands on Daniel's shoulders. He's not sure how to comfort Daniel or even that he can, but he can leave Daniel with a memory of their parting that should ease the sadness that is sure to come.

"I don't know what is going to happen, but whatever happens is supposed to happen." Will says looking into the emerald green eyes that mist up as he speaks.

"It still sucks." Daniel says folding, falling forward into arms he cannot imagine never embracing again. "Ah fuck…Will."

Will cradles Daniel's head in his shoulder, nuzzles the soft curls at his nose and inhales the warm sweet scent of him. He lifts his eyes to find Hannibal observing of course, but he sees something of the gentleness he knows Hannibal capable of shining in those luminous dark eyes. Fission, he thinks again. If I could just dissolve right now…

Daniel pushes off and wipes his nose. He turns without looking at either Hannibal or Will and coos to the dogs. They follow him into the kitchen to receive their bed time treats. Will watches from between his fingers as he massages his face, incredibly tired all of sudden. He feels like somebody's punching bag and supposes he may yet actually become one. The night is young.

"What are you planning to tell Pazzi?" Hannibal asks slinging the bag over his shoulder.

"About Daniel? That he went to bed. Car's in the garage. As long as Daniel is not a visual distraction is all that matters. Where are you going to be?"

"Where I always am. Right beside you."

Rinaldo Pazzi steps out of his car, checks his holstered weapon, and walks quickly up the hill keeping to the shadows as he looks from side to side. Clayton lives in a very nice area. Fiesole is prime real estate and Pazzi supposes he makes the six figures to afford to live here. He thinks Clayton's cushy life is about to come to an abrupt end.

Crawford might be able to nail Clayton on conspiracy charges if he can get around that patient doctor confidentiality bullshit. He thinks perhaps Clayton is stuck in a sticky situation. He may not be a co-conspirator, but he is not innocent. Setting the brash mouthed journalist onto Clayton had felt good, but he has yet to find any mention of Clayton or Graham on Lounds' blog. Her last post was this morning, sent from Boboli before one of his guys escorted her out. She is likely still investigating or fucking.

The red headed firebrand certainly speaks Italian. Standing up and on her back. As it is, it doesn't matter. The Paolini have managed to make his life more difficult. He wouldn't have to be here personally except for their sudden yellow streak. The original arrangement involved Pazzi providing them with Graham and Lecter at a convenient location for the Paolini to pick them up. But the Paolini had been greedy. Had sent two of their own to stalk Graham in that alley. Pazzi knows he would have had Graham and soon after, Lecter that day if the Paolini had not interfered.

Pazzi pauses at the foot of Clayton's driveway. He checks his phone one more time to make sure the Casaletto brothers are on speed dial in case things get messy with Graham. Graham is apparently quite the scrapper. First order of business with him is to make sure he is unarmed. Clayton is Pazzi's main concern. A loose end and a potential problem depending on what he sees here tonight. The risk Pazzi is taking is enormous.

The house is dark. Dim light shines from behind the closed slats of the blinds. Pazzi steps up to the porch and raps softly at the door. He hears the shuffling of shoes approach and then the heavy wood door creaks open and Graham appears on the other side of the screen. He holds a tumbler of whiskey it looks like and he wears no shoes.

"Captain Pazzi." Graham says, clicking his tongue, eyes narrowed to sleepy slits, "What brings you here? You're not my security detail, are you?"

"*Buona sera, Signor* Graham. The detail is in a car down the street."

"You walked up here to tell me that?"

Will looks around the yard, gazes up and down the street. He locates the black sedan again and figures there is no security detail in the vehicle. At least no Polizia are in the vehicle. He takes a sip from his glass and rubs at one eye with the other hand.

"Well, I don't have your phone number. Were you about to turn in?"

Pazzi wonders how many tumblers of whiskey Graham has had. He doesn't seem to be carrying a weapon, but Pazzi would prefer to incapacitate him to make sure. Graham leans back inside and sets his tumbler on an end table, smacks his lips.

"Getting there. Doctor Clayton is already in bed. I was just about to…go to bed myself."

"It's been a long day. I wanted to discuss the crime scene with you. If you don't mind."

Pazzi scratches at his beard and thinks Graham actually appears a little amorous, but his tone is decidedly challenging. He thinks perhaps Clayton may not be asleep just yet.

"I do. You can talk to me downtown tomorrow at HQ."

"I thought since I was here, we could do it now." Pazzi says.

Pazzi shifts his weight, scuffs his feet along the cement. Will knows he is getting impatient, more agitated the longer this takes.

"It's not my problem you decided to make a house call. Good night and…thanks for the security." Will starts to close the wood door.

Pazzi pulls open the screen and places a shiny leather boot on the doorstep. "I really must insist. We can talk in the car if you don't want to invite me in."

"You aren't here about the crime scene. And I'm not following you out to your car."

"Oh? What am I here about then?"

Pazzi slips his hand inside his pocket, grips his phone. A moment later Will sees lights flash from the sedan down the road. He could have disarmed Pazzi easily by now; in his mind's eye he has already done it. Instead, he moves slowly, tipsily as he leans out the door allowing Pazzi to draw his gun on him.

"You're not going to shoot me in this nice neighborhood, are you Captain Pazzi?"

"No need to wake up the neighbors. Where's your boyfriend?"

"Which one?" Will laughs.

"The one who would kill me and eat me afterward. That one."

Pazzi pulls Will away from the door holding the gun to his side. He looks over his shoulder at the sound of rubber rolling on gravel. The sedan sits parked at the edge of the drive. He shoves Will forward off the porch and onto the flagstone walkway.

"Where is he? No guardian devil this evening?" Pazzi says, head turning from side to side.

Will waves a hand in the air. "I gave him the night off. Look, Rinaldo…I am not getting in that car with you and you…are not going to shoot me."

"And why is that?"

"Because Mason Verger doesn't want you to. That is why you are here, isn't it?"

"I don't have time for this…"

Pazzi grinds the gun into Will's side but Will wrests away and manages to throw a solid punch to his jaw before Pazzi clubs him over the head with the butt of his service Beretta.

Daniel starts at the window, the spontaneous urge to run outside is overwhelming, but Hannibal grips his arm and places his finger to his lips when Daniel begins to protest. Daniel stands stiffly beside Hannibal but does not move. He feels the fingers about his arm loosen just a tad and Daniel swallows his fear. Together they watch Pazzi drag Will the length of the dark yard and into the back seat of the black Cadillac.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 77
Giasone is another of Roberto Ferri's paintings in the style of Caravaggio. This Greek hero here is Jason who fought a dragon to get the Golden Fleece. But he couldn't have pulled it off without Medea's help. Medea fell in love with Jason, after being struck with one of Eros' arrows.
Will, Hannibal, and Daniel are all quoting from Goethe's Faust Part II, Scene II, Act III
Daniel quotes from Dante's Inferno Canto V "I felt for the tormented whirlwinds damned for their carnal sins committed when they let their passions rule their reason."
Will and Daniel quote lyrics from the Rolling Stones' Sympathy for the Devil
"My soul tasted that heavenly food, which gives new appetite while it satiates. Dante,

Purgatorio XXXI
“Then cherish pity, lest you drive an angel from your door.” William Blake, Songs of Innocence and Experience
The quotes about the Eucharist are from Ecclesiastes 24:21

Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Daniel cross swords after Will leaves with Pazzi. (not those swords) Bedelia reaches out to Jack. Mason presents his trap.

"We don’t have much time." Hannibal says as Will sinks into his usual chair opposite him.

Another bump in the road registers and Will is vaguely aware of the cloying cologne wafting from the warm body beside him as he reclines in the backseat of the Cadillac. He lets the road roll away so he feels the silky fibers of the Isfahan carpet upon his bare feet again. He tugs at the collar of his shirt until the disorientation dissipates and the car disappears completely.

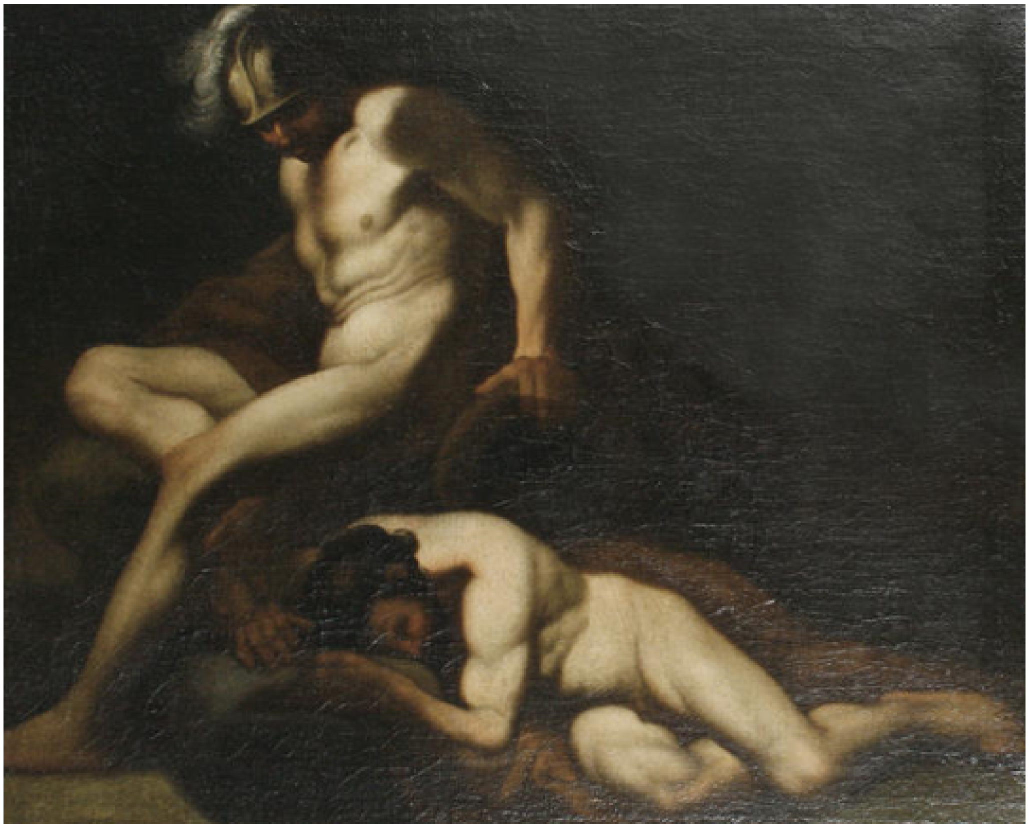
"I know. Troy beckons out there and here, too." Will gestures at the drapes as he looks into Hannibal’s red rimmed eyes. His inferno beckons as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 78

Hannibal and Daniel cross swords after Will leaves with Pazzi. (not *those* swords) Bedelia reaches out to Jack. Mason presents his trap.



Achilles and Patroclus, French School, 1800

He was lost in reflection when Antilochus, bathed in scalding tears, brought the bitter news: 'Alas, Achilles, sad are the tidings you must hear. Would it were not so, but Patroclus has fallen, and they fight over his corpse, his naked corpse, for Hector of the gleaming helm has your armour.'

At these words, a black cloud of grief shrouded Achilles. Grasping handfuls of dark sand and ash, he poured them over his head and handsome face, soiling his scented tunic. Then he flung himself in the dust, and lying there outstretched, a fallen giant, tore and fouled his hair.

Hector might have dragged away the corpse and won eternal glory, had not swift-footed Iris carried a message to Achilles to arm for war. Reaching him, she uttered winged words: 'Up, son of Peleus, most daunting of men. Save the body of Patroclus, they are fighting over it beside the ships. Men are dying while your Greeks try to protect his corpse, and the Trojans attack, longing to drag him off to windy Troy. Glorious Hector is their leader, who sets his heart on slicing his head from the tender neck, and fixing it on a stake above the wall. Up then, and no more idling here! Fear shame in your heart if Patroclus becomes a plaything for the dogs of Troy. You will be the one to reproach if the corpse comes mutilated to our hands.'

Iliad Book XVIII

Daniel rubs at his shirt; a residual flaring of scarred flesh fades beneath it as he watches the glow of the Cadillac's tail lights disappear into the darkness. He glances at the tumbler on his end table and it seems to Daniel to throb in the muted lamplight, the spectre of Will's hand still upon it. Will's emotional tide recedes; a fistful of foam in his chest is all that remains of him as Daniel looks to Hannibal.

Hannibal squeezes his bicep gently before dropping his hand though the gesture hardly releases him. The dark eyes gazing into his seem to glow with satisfaction as though Hannibal has swallowed him up in one huge gulp, Daniel's secrets already sliding down the haughty throat. Daniel pulls away slowly, putting some distance between them so it doesn't feel so *intimate.*

"Difficult to let him go, isn't it?" Hannibal nods at the slated blinds separating them from the empty street.

"Difficult to escape the architect of his design." Daniel folds his arms across his chest cognizant of the signal the gesture sends.

He knows everything he does is catalogued by Hannibal, analyzed and filed away. He is as readable to Hannibal as the proverbial open book, his psyche laid bare, and his desires as transparent as a glass of water. Hannibal need only tip the glass and Daniel would fold onto his shoulders as he had Will's the need to be comforted is so great.

Instead, Daniel picks up Will's tumbler and drains it, scotch scorching his throat and Daniel welcomes the few seconds of searing heat, clings to it.

"There is purpose in the design."

Hannibal pauses, cocks his head to one side as the doctor smacks the last of the scotch and Will from his lips. No more duets for Clayton.

"There are two designs." Daniel says, "Yours and his."

"No." Hannibal glances at his watch, "There is but one design. Always one design where Will is concerned."

Daniel wipes his mouth, green eyes smoldering with a petulance that rivals Will's churlish storms. Will has imprinted indelibly upon the young doctor, attachment engrained, as much a part of him now as the flushed cheeks and fragrant curls that frame his face.

"To wake up to who he is." Daniel repeats the mantra he has heard from Will many times.

"I detect a degree of dissent." Hannibal smiles slightly, "Tell me, could you feel Pazzi and Will as they struggled in the yard?"

A tiny tic of flesh around the green eyes signals reluctance, but the little mouse capitulates; resistance dissipates in an unburdening of breath. Daniel twists the wand at the window and the blinds open so they can look through the window at the vacant yard. Reticent lips curve slowly; an uncertain smile emerges as he shares his gift with Hannibal.

"Pazzi…was a bubbling geyser of vitriol, spite, the desire to injure barely sated and riding on top of that…waves of anxiety." Daniel says seeing no point in pretending Hannibal is not aware of his empathy.

"And Will?"

A long pause. Daniel stares into his front yard remembering very much aware of the lion at his side. Hannibal is lust and violence, hot breath upon his neck, a sharp scoring of teeth and Daniel realizes he has felt the same raw excitement in Will…in their bed upstairs. He stares stubbornly out the window, preferring Hannibal's reflection to the flesh. His fear is that Hannibal will save himself and leave Will to his fate, his final punishment for betraying Hannibal by rejecting him. Choosing death over a life with him is likely not a forgivable sin against the creator.

Since he has already schooled Hannibal on the importance of honesty, he decides now would not be a good time to contradict himself.

"I felt contempt, cold like a lump of ice he slipped into a wrinkled pocket of resignation. There's weariness in that pocket, I feel it like a stone on my chest, a…yoke over my shoulders."

Hannibal thinks the weight Daniel feels from Will is the anchor that holds his little ship fast, a tether that ties him to his inferno. Clayton's fingers circle the edge of the tumbler contemplating the empty glass perhaps feeling a similar emptiness; the separation from Will carves a hollow void in Hannibal, too. In this, he and Clayton are alike.

"Fascinating. You possess an evolutionary advantage. How close do you have to be to experience another's emotions?"

"The closer the more intense and accurate. Proximity matters."

"And in a crowd?"

"Confusing, potentially overwhelming." Daniel says.

Hannibal thinks of the times he has seen Clayton listening to his music player, head swaying with ear buds hanging from his ears.

"Music. You tune out what you don't want." Hannibal says.

The Vivaldi *Winter* concerto they have been listening to ends. The low chords of a cello begin, the melody instantly registers and Hannibal notes the sweep of Clayton's gaze. Clayton's eyes alight on the piano as Pachelbel's *Canon in D* queues up on the sound system. The expressive emerald eyes narrow with the sting of associations he cannot help, surrounded by a mist of memory. Hannibal knows well the wound that weeps when he sits at his piano alone. Clayton must have surmised Will had associations, too, and had chosen this piece to play together for a multitude of reasons, not the least of which had been rooted in therapy. Clayton's therapy with Will had been successful because Clayton had employed a multi-front approach. Just like Hannibal had.

Clayton had instinctively understood that if he were to reach Will he would have to saturate Will in his therapy. Will had been soaked to the bone with Hannibal's. The little mouse had intuitively struck a chord within Will by selecting this piece to practice together.

"I try to tune people out." Another pause ensues and Daniel struggles to concentrate too distracted by the haunting piece he associates with Will. The notes tug at him in places too raw to be tugged right now. Especially with Hannibal's powerful presence looming over him.

"You don't feel especially torn up over Will's departure." Daniel says hoping to persuade Hannibal to talk about himself.

"I experience the situation differently than you. What did you feel from him when he held you in that embrace?"

Daniel sighs and thinks a moment. He had felt a mixture of emotions, blended as they always seem between him and Will, difficult to differentiate this time because they were feeling the same thing.

“Sadness, but mostly fear.”

The sadness is to be expected. Clayton may have felt Will’s fear but Hannibal wants to know if he understood the source of that fear. To understand that is to understand the design. Clayton is perceptive and quite capable of sorting through the puzzle that is Will’s psyche, but his feelings for Will also present an obstacle. In love, you take leave of your senses. Hannibal knows this all too well.

“And what were you thinking while Will struggled with Captain Pazzi?”

“I was thinking he’s right there. You both want to kill him. Why not do it and be done with it? Send Crawford to wherever it is you both seem to know the Paolini are. There should be enough evidence to nail them for the reward.”

“That is not the design, Daniel.”

“I know what Will is planning. So do you. You aren’t going to let him…sacrifice himself, are you?”

“You think that is what is happening? Will doesn’t want a sacrifice. Will is very good at telling himself things when he does not want to see.”

“I don’t understand. Will fears he might succeed? Or that he won’t?”

“Depends on what you mean by succeed. Rather what you believe Will thinks he means.”

“Will withholds things from me, but lying?” Daniel shakes his head, “That would be counter-productive. You think Will has been deceiving me?”

Daniel makes a face that indicates such a thing is impossible. Hannibal knows precisely how possible such a thing is. In all fairness, Clayton has no reason to doubt Will’s intentions. Their relationship is not adversarial and Clayton believes in honesty, a concept he is likely finding as flexible as his ethics. Will plays games too and Clayton does not want to admit that Will has played him. Unconsciously, or not.

Hannibal decides to enlighten the little mouse; sour the milk Will would continue to guzzle, the sweet teat from which it flows too tasty to let go. Will allowed Clayton into his head knowing where that would lead and feels guilty about it. Patroclus had willingly laid down his shield and given his armor to Hector piece by piece knowing full well that Achilles would want it back.

“Not consciously. He has been deceiving himself. Your therapy with him has been productive and must have revealed as much.”

Hannibal looks directly into the glittering eyes and Clayton arches his brows but offers nothing more, the expression on his face reminiscent of the irreverent and taunting looks he receives from Will.

“What drugs did you use to regress him? You did regress him, induced a hypnotic state.”

“I did. We did. I gave him a blend of organics, avoided anything Chilton…or you might have given him.”

“Interesting. And he went for it… You favor Gestalt. An inverse of psychic driving. You used drugs to lower his inhibitions and promote free association with a little guidance I suspect.”

“I provided him with a safe environment. He was still recovering when you sent Luciano.”

Hannibal considers this. “Recovering for how long?”

“Hours. Not long. The same day in fact.” Daniel’s mind spins, ideas and connections just out of reach. He can’t think with Hannibal standing right here…

Will had been in a highly suggestive state when Luciano attacked Hannibal thinks. Hannibal’s timing could not have been better. Will’s imagination has been in overdrive ever since. Du Maurier’s cocktail had been tantamount to another tank of gasoline to fuel the fevered nightmares that follow him.

Though Hannibal is certain the abandoned Paolini slaughter house is Pazzi’s destination, Hannibal does not want to tarry too long. He can allow the cub some discomfort at the hands of the Paolini, a dose of righteous anger would get his blood flowing, but his agreement with the Paolini hinges on Will’s response to Elario’s impending inquiry and Hannibal does not know at what point Elario intends to insert himself.

Neither does Hannibal know the actual structure of Mason’s trap beyond the transparent blueprint of revenge that consumes Mason’s every thought, and what Roberta conveyed to him after talking with Elario. But, Mason’s miserable memory palace is such a miniscule structure that the shape of his vengeance will be similarly narrow. He returns his attention to Will’s anchor churning in the sea of blood and emptiness he has found himself.

Pachelbel’s *Canon* finishes the last few measures releasing Daniel from the near hypnotic trance the favored piece always sends him. When Will hears this piece, does he think of playing with Hannibal or with him?

There is more than one melody playing in your head, isn’t there, Will? One fortissimo and the other…pianissimo.

A very apt analogy…and so typical of you to phrase something so indelicate so delicately.

Another Baroque composition starts; Bach again, another piano concerto. As Daniel stands with arms still folded across his chest wrapped tightly in his own straight jacket, the thought occurs to him that like himself, Hannibal uses music to create a mental ambiance, a portable device to transport his universe with him. His *Iliad* part of his design and Daniel and Will are hopelessly caught up in it.

“Will is the butterfly clinging to his cocoon. If Will truly intended to sacrifice himself he wouldn’t have told me about it.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel grinds his teeth so the impulse to drop his jaw is countered. He’s sure Hannibal will say something else to cause the same reaction.

“I told you his sins of omission often speak louder than his words.”

“His intentions are difficult to ferret out. You aren’t sure either, are you?”

Hannibal blinks in surprise. Transference, he thinks. And yet... deception is their favored currency. His chest begins to throb; anger and uncertainty descend to sear the edges of the wound Will keeps opening. Will accepted the offering of Hannibal's heart at the dinner table in Impruneta, poignantly offered his own heart in his tableau. Will would not serve up his heart and dangle it in front of Hannibal only to hand it to Mason. So infuriating…his Will. It would be a brilliant play on Will's part, to hide his intentions in plain sight. A design within a design.

Wrathful Achilles, ever aware of that inconvenient heel.

"Will can weave a tapestry of lies and deceit as skillfully as you." Daniel says.

The beaked nose wriggles as though Hannibal could sniff Daniel's anxiety like his cologne. Daniel thinks that entirely possible. He actually feels a stab to his heart, a twisting of metal and he thinks of Will's hand on the hilt of the blade that turns in Hannibal's chest as they trade barbs in his living room. Although Daniel finds it gratifying that Hannibal is not immune to Will's charms or manipulation, he does find the uncomfortable spike of anger lodged between his ribs a chilling reminder of what Hannibal is capable of.

"We are just alike." Hannibal agrees as the spike grows hot.

Daniel's stomach churns as his thoughts turn to the contents of the duffle bag at Hannibal's feet. His belt is in there and in Hannibal's bag is where Daniel wants it to remain. Will understands Hannibal's universe. Had he understood the implications of what he was doing when he exchanged gifts with Hannibal for their truce?

The way out of my inferno is to mock God. To reject tradition and accept the notion I am beholden to no values other than my own.

To celebrate and revel in your…exclusion. With him.

Daniel remembers their debriefing after the hypnotherapy. Will has already told Daniel he knows the way out of his inferno. Hannibal is right. Will does not really believe an act of redemption will free him from his inferno. Like Hannibal, Will rejects religion; it is a tool, a necessary lens he looks through to frame his empathy. Daniel thinks he is refusing Hannibal's exclusion and gift…again. Will is trying to save him. Hannibal is seeing what Will wants him to see. Will's design is fluid. It has to be to absorb the twists and turns Hannibal has him navigating through.

This game they play…is madness.

"Will is um…naked a lot in his dreams." Daniel's words come stilted as he edits them, "A mental metaphor for hiding and revealing his true feelings, his identity. The goal of my therapy and yours."

"Perceptive. He laid down his shield for you. Opened up his forts. You've helped him face his fear. Will awakened in Boboli Gardens after our dinner naked, didn't he? When Patroclus awakens in Troy he'll still be just as naked. By design."

"Whose design? What are you talking about?"

Daniel is aware of only one design; the one he has been talking about with Will. It is becoming apparent to Daniel that the depth and scope of Hannibal's narrative runs far deeper than he is aware. Will must be aware. Hannibal is implying that Will is aware.

They think alike not only because Will can think like Hannibal; they think alike because they are alike. When Will said that very little happens around Hannibal that he doesn't already expect he was also talking about himself. Surprising each other at this point must be very difficult indeed.

Daniel knows what treading water feels like. He feels less like an anchor now and more the bobbing buoy between shore and ship, left behind to an uncertain fate. The glow of confidence radiates from Hannibal and it is impossible to miss the predatory gleam in his eyes.

Hannibal considers the puzzled expression as Clayton struggles to make this new information fit into the narrative he has composed with Will. Will has been selective about what he discloses as he should. Will's protectiveness is warranted, even admirable and Hannibal would expect nothing less. Hannibal thinks he can help Clayton understand the design without divulging too much too soon.

"Hector has stripped Patroclus of his armor." Hannibal says as consternation crosses Clayton's features like a thundercloud.

"Stop calling me…"

The hooded eyes narrow and Daniel finds himself staring at stark creases in the chiseled landscape of the handsome face.

Fuck me, Daniel thinks. "…Hector. Why purposely upset me? And why now? Is that how you see me?"

Clayton is absolutely refreshing. Something of Will's impatience flares behind the sea of green. Will can talk around something for hours while he slowly digests ideas like meals, but Clayton confronts. His empathy is immediate and he has learned to provoke to get his answers. Hannibal will accommodate him and Clayton can infer what he wants.

"You can sense my emotions can't you? What does your empathy tell you?" Hannibal asks.

"I feel plenty of emotions from you but I can't attribute them. There are limits to my…gift."

"Even though I stand right in front of you, you don't know what I am thinking about."

"Exactly." Daniel says.

"You dwell on Hector's demise."

"Well, yes. Wouldn't you?"

"Hector's sterling attributes were many, as are yours. You must admit, there are *some* parallels. The *Iliad* we write is not yet finished, is it?"

"Let's hope the Greeks and Trojans don't fight over Patroclus' body, then." Daniel says shifting the focus back to Hannibal's favorite topic.

Hannibal is going to continue to be evasive. His anxiety only delights Hannibal. Thoughts of his belt laced around his ankles and being dragged behind a car give way to shockingly gratifying images of wrapping his belt around Hannibal's neck and he feels better, somewhat.

Will had set this epic in motion by sending the Paolini off to Lithuania. Hannibal had responded spectacularly. The two of them have been manipulating each other ever since. Hannibal's take on the situation may be more accurate than Daniel had thought. Daniel considers that if Patroclus' actions determine the course of events he is relatively safe. It's the *relative* aspect of the state of affairs that troubles him. He sighs and thinks he feels something of the exasperation Will must feel sparring with Hannibal.

Daniel senses the danger, knows Hannibal is dangerous, but Hannibal doesn't feel threatening and therein lays the rub for Daniel. Hannibal is comforting and terrifying at the same time and Daniel is fully aware he has embraced the madness of this surreal universe. He takes a breath before he continues with the insanity.

"Will took off his *armor*. I stripped him of nothing."

Clayton's voice is edged with irritation which Hannibal ignores. He also ignores the denial. Clayton's statement is inaccurate as the unmade bed upstairs attests, an entirely different sort of stripping but just as effective. He is rattled enough already; no need to give voice to imagery.

"The fact that he allowed you to strip it from him changes nothing. You still have it. It is Hector who strikes the fatal blow to Patroclus and takes from him Achilles' armor." Hannibal insists.

"You are twisting the metaphors so they fit into your design."

"Am I?"

"I took no armor from him." Daniel insists again, emphatically.

His mind frantically searches his memory for verses that counter Hannibal's interpretation and he stops, wondering why he even bothers to argue with the madness. This is not a debate. This is all or nothing for Hannibal. Hannibal is lifting the veil Will has been looking through all along, too afraid to yank it away completely, too enthralled to leave Hannibal at the altar. Until now.

"Haven't you? You've been stripping it from him for weeks, peeled him back layer by layer and made him look at what he does not want to see."

"That's why you keep asking him whose armor he wears. He isn't wearing any."

"Your therapy like mine, the psychological alchemy we spoke of before. Same design, different application. You systematically removed his resistance. Constructive destruction. Reduced him to his essence.

Daniel forces a smile. "You're welcome. Does he know that?"

Daniel still isn't sure where Hannibal is leading him, but Daniel has no choice but to follow if he is to understand the design Hannibal seems to want him to see.

Hannibal nods. "He knows. He's refusing to put any on at all."

He has to leave soon, but not before he leaves the little mouse some more cheese upon which to chew.

"Menelaus will not be bearing Patroclus from the field of battle this time. He will leave him with the Trojans unclaimed and alone but for Achilles. Patroclus gave his armor to Hector, piece by piece, and Achilles, monster that he is, would have it back."

Clayton's eyes widen considerably, questioning the intent of Hannibal's pointed jibe. Hannibal enjoys the pinch of surprised alarm that crosses the delicate features as he leans in close to cradle the curls and head in his palm as he does with Will. He brushes his lips over Clayton's, lips already parted in preparation; head of luscious curls already tilted back.

"With your permission of course." Hannibal whispers covering the beautiful mouth with his own, the crush of flesh intoxicating.

Daniel quivers with sensations, his thoughts shrink compressed into this singular moment. Confused, exhilarated and certainly terrified, Daniel pushes off, wrests away from the stimulating embrace and stands drawing one ragged breath after the other. Hannibal stares back at him, eyes shining like black jewels in the lamp light. Daniel wipes his mouth, not sure what just happened and thinks that exactly what Hannibal had intended.

"Will let you know his intentions so you would save him. You are going to save Will, aren't you?"

Permission granted. Hannibal thinks. "It is always my intention to give Will what he needs. That… is at the heart of the design."

"Go and join him then, before you find your faithful friend lying there mangled by cruel bronze." Daniel says, memory managing to lift an appropriate verse.

The feeling of treading water persists as he tries to collect himself and his thoughts. Something important just happened and Daniel will be damned if he can figure out what it was.

Hannibal nods approvingly at Clayton's clever urging for him to leave, "*With chariot and horses did Achilles send him into battle, never to welcome him back alive.* I'll be on my way then.*"*

The pained expression on Clayton's exquisite face prods the wound, just a touch, and Hannibal is moved to offer Clayton a parting kindness to soothe the furrowed brows so like Will's.

"Don't despair, doctor. The Fates smile upon Achilles. Hector will see Patroclus again. You have his phone?"

Daniel cringes at being addressed as Hector so openly, so…flippantly. He does not like it in the least, but he nods in answer to the great Achilles. His mind whirls with the jumble of emotions that keep tumbling with every contradictory word out of Hannibal's mouth while his nerves jangle, frayed live wires frizzling beneath his skin. The room is alive with the heat emanating from the vicious creature that would ravage him senseless and then rip him apart.

Hannibal picks up his duffle bag, slides it over one shoulder then the other and reaches in his pockets for the keys to the Ducati parked beside a post in Daniel's garage. Hannibal needs to ask one more question before he departs.

"Do you have a full tank of gas?"

"What? Um…no."

"Fill it up. I'll have him call you after the walls come down. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts."

Hannibal winks as he pushes open the front door. Daniel watches him stroll to his garage. He stares dumbfounded as Hannibal grasps the brass handle and lifts the old wooden door up revealing a sleek black motor bike gleaming in a halo of yellow electric light beside his burgundy Mercedes. Of course, Hannibal owns a Ducati. The reason Daniel has to drive ten miles to the nearest gas pump is perfectly clear. Two people cannot safely ride the beautiful bike without sitting on top of each other.

A moment later, Daniel stands in his doorway alone, the sound of the Ducati's motor in his ears, the taste of madness still upon his lips.

Will stalks through the door of Hannibal's office in Baltimore slamming it shut behind him fully aware he is hallucinating. The crimson and white drapes billow in a breeze that should be fanning the flames licking at the walls of the fireplace except the fire burns sedately as always and the drapes open onto a white sandy beach where triremes drift upon a sea as clear and blue as the sky above. Beyond the fireplace where the brick should be lies the devastated vista of his inferno, the scent of rust and blood burns his nostrils and Will turns away.

Hannibal sits in his usual chair wearing one of his plaid brushed wool suits, a honey brown like the smooth leather he sits upon. The brown wool is crossed with blocks of pale blue that match the crisp shirt beneath the tailored suit and the precise shade of Will's eyes. He looks up from his notepad and offers Will a sidelong glance. With a wave of his hand, he invites Will to sit down.

We don't have much time. Hannibal says as Will sinks into his usual chair opposite him.

Another bump in the road registers and Will is vaguely aware of the cloying cologne wafting from the warm body beside him as he reclines in the backseat of the Cadillac. He lets the road roll away so he feels the silky fibers of the Isfahan carpet upon his bare feet again. He tugs at the collar of his shirt until the disorientation dissipates and the car disappears completely.

I know. Troy beckons out there and here, too. Will gestures at the drapes as he looks into Hannibal's red rimmed eyes. His inferno beckons as well.

Still undecided and indifferent? Hannibal says, putting down pen and paper.

Still trying to posit my intentions?

I think you are still trying to posit your intentions.

Is that what I am doing?

That's why you came here. Hannibal looks around his office with a wistful sigh. *But we don't really want to talk here, do we?*

Will is suddenly at the threshold to Hannibal's salon. He peers inside and Hannibal is already at the harpsichord, sunlight streams through the huge windows and the brightness belies the bedlam at his back. Will looks up expecting to see the vaulted ceiling and chandeliers he remembers, but he sees only sky overhead and he watches the azure cloudless heavens fade to ink and pinpoints of light appear.

He realizes he stares out the window of the car and quickly shuts his eyes willing himself to stay in this moment. He crosses the salon, the marble cool and smooth beneath his feet. He looks down at Hannibal who pats the bench. Utterly helpless to stop himself, he grins and scoots across the bench and takes up his usual seat. He touches the black ivory keys and the contentment stealing across Hannibal's face is infectious.

I hate that I want this.

Is it the hating that you love, or is it the loving that you hate?

I'll let you know when I figure that out.

Hannibal sifts through the rack of sheet music before them and Will knows what he is looking for. He groans as the finely manicured nails rifle through the pages, removing all the scores but one. Mozart's dreaded Piano Sonata, no. 11.

It's in a 6/8 time signature. Will says with a grimace. *Too many notes.*

An observation Mozart did not take kindly if I recall. This is to be played andante grazioso. Fast, but gracefully.

I remember.

Hannibal's fingers begin stroking the keys, plucking out the bass clef notes, slowly, just warming up. Will listens intently, enjoying the stolen moment while ignoring the fact he sits slumped against a cold window in an air conditioned car and not really sitting shoulder to shoulder with Hannibal in the salon.

You avoided the salon the last time were together at my home.

Practiced fingers sail over the keys, the touch delicate despite the violence Will knows also flows from them.

Yes. Will says simply. It's not an accusation, merely fact.

Do you remember the evening I cooked Lomo Saltado for us? Hannibal says leaning into Will so he can reach the upper octaves.

Will moves aside a little so Hannibal can play with both of his hands, inhaling his smell and noting every perfect strand of ash blonde hair. He sits riveted to those hands and listens while Hannibal plays the sonata slowly, *molto legato,* and Will thinks he likes it better this way.

Of course I remember. The words are spoken softly so as not to intrude upon the lovely melody.

Do you remember the next morning? Hannibal's words roll off his tongue equally softly.

Before you dug up what you thought was Lounds' corpse and made a shrine to Shiva?

Hannibal pauses in his playing, fingers poised over the keys, *Who was that anyway?*

Some cadaver from Johns Hopkins, I think. But you aren't talking about the shrine.

I remember the next morning, yes. Why? Will says feeling the blush of heat rise along his throat to flush hotly clear up to his ears and knows why.

I was intrigued by your…spontaneity. Hannibal's leg brushes against his trousers.

I was inspired by the night before. Will nudges the insistent leg away, imagines the supple leather about his wrists and Hannibal's tongue down his throat.

And I suppose you hate that as well.

What's your point? Will says licking lips flush with embarrassment.

You are capable of following inspiration when it strikes. You should do so more often.

I must allow myself to be intimate with my instincts. Will retorts with unrestrained sarcasm. *I have.*

Inconsistently. Still undecided and indifferent. You are destined to join that ill-band of angels mixed.

Angels don't dwell in the depths of my inferno.

Does the soul about to grasp the hand of Death see an angel or a demon? Perception. Here…you play.

Hannibal's fingers withdraw though his left hand continues to repeat the first couple measure of the first movement. Will glances at the rack, counts to himself and finally touches the keys, fumbling the first measure miserably and Hannibal stops.

Barely a note struck and already discord. Again. Start from the beginning. One, two, three…

Will has no time to argue, his fingers find the notes and he plays along with Hannibal. For a few blissful moments there is nothing but the music between them, orchestrations of carbon, their own synchronous symphony. But, the first movement is followed by the second and Will's fingers trip along the key board.

Timing… Hannibal warns.

Too late. Will's fingers curl and he drops them in his lap, a winsome sigh escapes, a grimace carves itself into his jaws that pulse in silent disappointment.

You hesitate. Hannibal tuts, lifting his eyes from the frustrated fists to the perturbed red line that is Will's mouth.

I have never played a piece flawlessly.

I can attest to that. The thin lips twitch to one side and Will rolls his eyes.

Then why the expectation that you will? Hannibal chides him. *You anticipate making a mistake. You don't trust your fingers to hit the right keys.*

Will nods, *There's a disconnect between reading the notes and my fingers.*

There is no disconnect but for the one you create. The hesitation is why your timing is off. You are thinking too much. When one is learning to play, one often hits the wrong notes, but one keeps on playing.

I think ahead. I can't help it.

You see yourself making a mistake and you hesitate. You know how to play, Will, but you don't enjoy it.

I enjoy it. Will says stubbornly.

You don't enjoy it in the moment. If you followed your instincts you would cease to doubt yourself.

Anticipating striking the wrong note is not the same thing as agonizing over making a mistake.

Hannibal's fingers float over the black and white ivory performing an impromptu arpeggio from middle C to high C.

It's a matter of scale, isn't it? Your instincts do not recognize scale. Your ego, your self, assigns values of scale.

Will looks down at his hands and opens them up, flexes his fingers and cracks a couple knuckles. He is anticipating making a mistake, anticipating regret as it were and he sits here with Hannibal at the harpsichord seeking what? Approval for planning their destruction?

This room invites honest conversation. We agreed to wait until we had removed the Greeks and Trojans. Will says dismissively although he moves not an inch from Hannibal.

If you have your way, that honest conversation will never happen.

Will looks aside and rubs the buffed wood, the glossy surface cool upon his fingertips and wonderfully distracting…

You hesitated to tell the truth all during dinner, though I gave you opportunity. You hesitated in the doorway to the salon, turned, and went upstairs instead. And again, when you climbed out of our bed. You didn't want to lie about Lounds in our sanctuary here, that night after our dinner, the night before Jack came...

No. The response is flat and quick.

Why?

The single syllable hangs in the air, a sharp distressed note and Will looks up from the buffed fallboard, the polish so sleek he can see their reflection in the gleaming board. The dark eyes also gazing into the highly buffed board shift upward at the same time. Will fights the usual inclination to avoid the hooded gaze that always seems to accompany his spontaneous bursts of honesty. Ironic that being caught with the truth causes him to avert his eyes with Hannibal. He thinks fleetingly that perhaps it's because Hannibal gloats too much when he's right.

I respected what we had created there between us. I…wanted to remember it that way.

Hannibal nods, satisfied. And he doesn't even gloat. *It would have been our last supper… of that life.*

I couldn't imagine another.

You still can't.

Will's fingers falter, his concentration shot.

Tsk, Tsk. Here, Hannibal says, pressing Will's thumb gently onto the black ivory, *…your fingers… like this and count, one, wait, two, wait…*

Will swallows, focuses his efforts and allows the music to flow from him while Hannibal counts softly, his fingers on the lower notes providing the proper time signature to follow while images hurtle through his mind, the same hand covering his own press a scalpel into ashen flesh.

Transitions are difficult for you. Always have been. The patient voice says.

He feels the tickle of Hannibal's nose in his hair, warm breath about his ear. He hates that he wants this. And it is with the wanting that the hating stops and another emotion kicks in, subtly, almost imperceptibly but it is there, a paper thin coating of ice that sends a shudder up his spine. He remembers his conversation with Hannibal at the villa, both of them standing by his ornate and decorous piano.

I think if you read more closely you would agree that Mephistopheles noticed something already corrupt in the conflicted Faust, as yet unaware of his…indifference to it.

Not…indifferent

Afraid, then.

His fingers and Hannibal's continue to strike the keys as the scalpel glides the length of Tier's torso and a thin line of red trails along ivory as the sonata flows from their fingers. The ivory keys shift as he plays, black becomes white and he is sitting with Daniel at his piano, French doors flung wide, Daniel's slender fingers float beside his own.

Hannibal. You want me to what? Find him? Kill him? Run off with him?

You have to finish this…one way or another. You cannot live your life in the land of what-if.

What life? I am…miserable, Daniel. I have boxed myself into a mental corner.

When you find what you seek, you will thrill to it. And you will hate yourself for wanting the thrill. But that is who you are.

I know who I am, Daniel.

The slender fingers continue to stroke the pristine ivory as drops of dark crimson fall upon them and Daniel continues to play, oblivious to the blood splattered keyboard his fingers all but slipping across the keys.

You won't kill him. You won't catch him. What's left? I'm feeling like the intermediary here. Am I your therapist or your confessor, Will? Or am I the messenger from your inferno? Your conscience, maybe? Because I can't be that.

The idea was to keep you out of my universe, but…it hasn't worked out that way.

I'm not going anywhere. You need to decide what I am…to you…

Daniel's presence at dinner this evening had been intermittent, his quiet mist all but evaporated lost to the overpowering scent of sacrifice Hannibal had served up. One of these things doesn't belong here…

Will reaches over the blood streaked keyboard and grabs Daniel's hand, fingers slipping around the warm slick of blood and looks up…into Hannibal's face just as his tongue swipes a trickle of red from the corner of his mouth. Will blinks and the low rumble of a V-8 engine vibrates beneath his seat. He blinks again and Hannibal is sitting across from him in his leather and chrome chair, firelight dancing across cheeks cut smooth as marble.

You don't want me to have anything in my life that's not you.

I only want what's best for you.

Will's' head seems to crack with the burst of light that splits Hannibal's office in half and Will tumbles into a bed, lands flat on his stomach his body pinned comfortably beneath Daniel who sits astride his thighs, tumbler of whiskey in his hand.

Hannibal is also systematically removing all my remaining supports. Gradually, but he's already alienating me, just like last time.

And you are allowing him, just like last time.

I am allowing it, but it's not like last time…

This time is very different from last time. Will has been deliberately distancing himself without any help from Hannibal, disengaging from relationships as casually as decoupling boxcars. Not that he has that many cars to decouple... Will shakes his head into the pillow and inhales a whiff of sandalwood of spiced leather. He flips onto his back and stares up at Hannibal who holds a glass of wine in one hand, the other firmly wrapped around Will's cock. He sets his wine on the nightstand and eases himself onto the mattress and stretches out beside Will, practically purring with contentment.

Whose armor are you wearing this time? Hannibal asks suddenly, sinking deeper into the crush of crimson satin.

You already know the answer to that.

Will shifts his weight, rolls his hips, the stroking feels phenomenally good as the fresh sheets slip around sticking to his skin in the sweltering heat. Will doesn't remember Hannibal's bedroom ever being so hot. His skin glistens with perspiration and he sees beads of sweat upon Hannibal's brow when he looks up. It occurs to him something is different about the room and realizes the walls are not the blue he remembers but dark red. The entire room shimmers in a blushing red haze like his inferno.

You allowed Hector to remove it. To what end?

I'm still working on that. Will says absently, mind still distracted by the shift in color.

Better work faster…

The bed seems to rock, his body registers movement, vibrations cut the air as cool sheets slip away and moist heat tinged with the fetid odor of manure fills his nostrils. Will heaves the dense humid air through ribs pressed tight, constricted.

How hard did you hit him?

Please. A smack on the back of the head with my gun. He should have woken up in the car. That's why I brought the Casaletto brothers along.

And how many times did they hit him?

Tano hit him once, in the back seat.

What for?

He moved.

He smells like a distillery.

He uh… had been drinking. I hear Graham likes his booze.

I hear he likes his knives, too. Did you frisk him?

Sounds like Pazzi…and, is that Mason? No…Mason couldn't be in Florence.

Will flips to his side so he can face Hannibal from the pillow. He cringes as black feathers sprout from Hannibal's skin, tiny needles poke through his flesh and fine black hairs like threads grow from the needles.

Did you think he would miss this? You're bleeding…

Will blinks several times, touches his hand to his throbbing skull and feels sticky wetness. A swish of feathers signals he rests in the sturdy wings of the serpent tailed eagle of his inferno. He twists around in the bed of glossy black feathers, shivers as downy softness glides between his legs, all over his exposed skin. He pushes the claws away already pulling at his hair and rubs his scalp. His hair is matted on one side in a sticky clump. He looks at his blood stained palm and leans into the cushion of plumes at his back. The smell of rust and blood is strong as he looks into the red rimmed eyes of his infernal companion.

You have been laid bare to the bones, Will. And I would have you, bones and all.

Take me, then.

The tip of its beak finds his jaw and sinks its razor sharp edge into his flesh drawing blood. Will bares his throat to the creature, feels the thin line it draws through whiskers and flesh, scraping bone. Its talons close upon his head; claws twine through matted locks and tug him deeper into the thicket of down, a tangle of curls and glossy feathers. The rust drenched mist thins and Will sees the points of light again through the haze, stars slipping through the black blanket overhead. Talons, hands…fingers prod and grasp his limbs and Will squeezes his eyes tightly and the pounding ache in his skull rings sharp.

The wings cradle him closer, the smooth curve of a single claw brushes his cheek and with the warm breath that falls upon his neck comes the serpent's voice to tickle his ear.

You think to remain here?

Seems as good a place as any.

You're hiding in your inferno, Will. What are you hiding from?

No sign of Doctor Lecter?

None.

Did you ask Mister Graham where he might be?

I don't think he was serious when he said he gave him the night off.

He knew you were coming. They both did.

Well, then Lecter shouldn't be far behind.

Time to face the music, Will. Accord or discord?

Will wriggles in the creature's grasp but the wings wrap more tightly around him beak scraping along his throat like a jagged knife.

Our symphony, point and counterpoint, unless you prefer I withdraw and leave you to your solo performance.

You're too curious to leave. You will play until the last note has been plucked.

Is that what you imagine? You would have that soiled piece of meat your executioner? It's your inferno, Will and you stay because you fear leaving more.

Will descends deeper into his dream and feels a crushing weight to his chest as he dives into his sea of madness. He continues to move against the glossy black tide that envelops him but his arms are pinned to his sides and he watches with growing alarm as the ground beneath shudders and blood oozes from the crags in the rocks, it bubbles thick and dark from the ground, like oil, like ink…

Give his phone to Cordell…oh! Music! We can't have a party without music.

Betrayal or forgiveness, Will. Tick, tock…

Will's ears burst with a jolt of a full orchestra. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony fills his head and veins throb with blood pulsing so painfully he can practically hear the thud of his heartbeat in his ears. Finally, Will manages the pounding in his head so it fuses with the pounding of the surf he hears coming from the bottom of the ravine. Will wrests himself free from the creature's hold and follows the sound of the waves down the ravine of rust and ravaged rock. He doesn't look at his feet he stumbles down one ruined terrace after another, his eyes stay focused on the sliver of light at the bottom of the hill. He thinks if he looks away, the light will disappear.

Soon he is running along the ancient shoreline of his dreams. The rust and rot of his inferno is left behind with the smell of sweaty hogs and rank soil. He inhales the scent of brine and salty air beneath the draped tent he has seen many times, its banners of snow white and brilliant red unfurled and riding the relentless wind that whips his hair about his face. He stops before the tent.

Will curls his toes into the sand stubbornly refusing to succumb to the other voices and sensations that threaten to burst into his private mindscape. He adjusts the crimson chiton hanging loosely from his shoulders so it hangs straight and clenches his hands in anticipation as walks inside the tent. The tent is empty.

Patroclus is alone but not for long.

The tall blonde haired warrior pulls the flap aside and ducks his head as he enters, displeasure drawn across thin lips as he glares at Will and then gestures toward the rough-hewn table in the middle of the tent. The source of his frown is immediately clear.

A cuirass of gleaming gold rests beside the table, as do a spear and shiny helmet. Patroclus dallies. He deigns to put on his armor and Achilles is having none of it.

Hannibal looks magnificent as he stands in full battle regalia except for his helmet that sits on the table before them. He shakes his mane of blond braids and beckons Will to come closer. Hands still balled into fists, Will approaches, walks right past the armor laid out for him stubbornly refusing to acknowledge it though it gleams brighter than the sun, and halts beside Hannibal.

They stand over a charcoal drawing. Will stares down at the scene young Hannibal had drawn on the beach of Achilles and Patroclus storming the walls of Troy alone. Hannibal's finger traces over the frayed edges of the thin vellum. He looks up at Will with that curious expression Will can only describe as amused patience.

Patroclus gave his life for his friend. Will says turning away to look at the dunes outside.

Achilles did not want him to. He does not now.

I know. Sometimes, a friendship is about giving the other what he needs, not what he wants.

Are you talking about me or you? At least Patroclus died fighting.

So did Achilles. Their fate to die in battle.

Forever denied their victory. You call on the Fates again. And so Patroclus makes his request, fool that he is, for his own doom and an evil death are the certain answer to his prayer.

Hannibal lifts his hand to take Will's face to his palm. He holds Will like that, and Will allows him, fingers cradling his head just behind the ear and thumb to lips. Lips part to taste that thumb before it presses, painfully so, separating lip from gums. Will pulls away and rubs at his mouth incensed and delighted. Disturbingly delighted.

May such anger never possess me as grips you, you whose useless valor only does harm to all. Will says pulling the injured flesh inside to nurse between his teeth.

Hmmm. A taunt to deflect or to invite another?

Silence. An inescapable truth swims like a fish along the distant horizon of Will's mind. Hannibal's chiding sends him skimming close to it but he veers away, loath to wander any nearer. The wind kicks up and Hannibal raises his head, seeming to sense the scent of battle as though it hangs in the sticky air. Will thinks perhaps he is sensing something else.

I forgave your betrayal, Will.

Bestowed your forgiveness upon my flesh in anger, pitiless man you are… the grey sea and stony cliffs bore you, with heart of granite.

Granite you managed to splinter, a heart you managed to wound.

A teacup you managed to shatter. Creator and creation, so much alike. How does that feel?

Ask yourself. Your blade of forgiveness is no less sharp than mine.

This…isn't forgiveness.

Neither is it redemption. It's fear. The reason you cannot see the garden in your inferno is the same reason you refuse your armor. Return to me when you have lit your light of deliverance among the ships…I wish the Trojans death to a man and give the Greeks likewise, and that we two might survive the ruin.

Did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?

You argue when you are afraid, Will.

Tano! Bring him over here.

He's moving again.

Ai! Essere un coglione! Don't hit him again.

What is happening has already happened. Had to happen. Is supposed to happen.

Easy to say when what is happening hasn't happened yet.

And what are you imagining is happening now?

I am imagining a conversation with you on the shores of Troy, but I know I am actually talking to myself.

And how is that different from imagining a life with me? That is what you fear.

Imagining does not make it so.

It's a start. Your imagination is an emotional process prompted by memory and associations, very much like dreaming.

And?

I remember an especially pleasant day hiking in the woods by your house. I sketched while you pretended to tie off your fishing flies. God and Adam, designing a garden together that day…

My head hurts.

It's going to hurt a lot more unless you wake up. Wake up to who you are.

I know who I am.

So do I. And so does Mason.

Mason…

Mason is a problem. Problem solving is hunting. A savage pleasure we can share together. Allow yourself to enjoy it. With me. Remember how you felt when you killed Randall.

I've never felt as alive as I did when I was killing him. As when I'm with you.

Deny me, deny yourself.

Betray you; betray myself?

And forgiveness? I don't need a sacrifice…do you? Time to take up the armor I bring or face the Trojans naked and alone. Our design. Betrayal or forgiveness, Will?

The wind shifts, dies, a stale stench permeates and to Will it reeks of damp decay and cigarettes… He looks beyond the still ribbons of crimson and white and sees the purple plumed helmets of Trojan warriors lined along the dunes. Signals from his subconscious. He hears the swell of the tide come closer.

You can't stay here with me, but you can join me…out there. Would Patroclus leave Achilles on the field of battle?

Would Achilles ever lay down his armor for Patroclus?

How badly do you want to know?

He looks into Hannibal's face, all patience as always in his dreamscapes because this is the Hannibal Will wants and loves. Will wants to argue with Hannibal, almost accuses him of being avoidant so he can remain a moment longer and Will reminds himself this Hannibal beside him cannot answer his question except with another question. He is talking to himself, a fragment of himself that knows Hannibal very well, but this fragment is not Hannibal. And with this realization comes another. Will *wants* the real answer to his question. He considers there are questions he could spend a life time asking...

I don't find you that interesting.

You will.

Will reaches for the gleaming cuirass and helmet and spear as the sea crashes all around him.

The afternoon shadows have long since withdrawn and the dark Tuscan night steals across Du Maurier's bedroom, the full moon the only source of light illuminating the tangles of copper spirals splayed across the pillow. Du Maurier gazes at the nude form twisted in her sheets. She licks at her lips as she considers the pale limbs cushioned in rosy satin, white as alabaster and just as still.

Lounds had not been so still a little while ago. The effects of the wine cocktail had been gradual; Lounds' inhibitions had slipped from her like her clothes, a little at a time until the last shred of resistance had been shed with the lace panties that now grace her carpet.

Du Maurier had administered the drugs slowly in a practiced seduction quite unlike the sneak attack she had perpetrated on Graham. Lounds had followed Du Maurier into the bedroom and had quickly put that glossy red mouth to work. Sheer bliss had erupted between the sheets and between her legs, Lounds' reputation for a sharp tongue well deserved. And, Du Maurier admits, Lounds is a rather tasty dish herself once she stops talking.

Du Maurier rises from the bed, a rustling of satin causes Lounds' eyelids to flutter and the lush red lips to part with a sudden breath, a wisp of a dream. She will be dreaming for several hours, long enough for Du Maurier to decide the precise manner of her fate.

Hannibal's tableau this morning has changed the shape of Du Maurier's design yet again. Zeus has erected a few more walls for his Leda to climb and Du Maurier must scale those walls if she is to ever escape from Florence alive. Du Maurier is convinced Hannibal's design culminates in an epic battle between her and Graham, unable to do it himself; Zeus would have his swan dispatch the Trojan masquerading as Patroclus.

Hannibal deludes himself as his charcoal sketches attest. Hannibal's intellect is compromised by his passion, passion that will be his undoing. Du Maurier sees two narratives running through that magnificent mind of his. One is a narrative drawn from the mythical tales of Mount Olympus, where Zeus and Hera rule and the narrative is rooted in his reason. The other narrative drawn from Homer's *Iliad* is rooted in his doomed romanticism, the tale of its tragic heroes resonating with Hannibal and he is helpless to stop himself.

I'm resuming Will Graham's therapy.

To what end? Besides your own?

He asked for my help.

Then maybe you deserve each other.

Unfortunate for him that he turns to Du Maurier in his time of need. Du Maurier leaves Lounds to her slumber, pulls on her zebra striped robe and walks to the kitchen where she has spread the contents of Lounds' pockets over the table. Lounds had been relieved of her personal belongings at the crime scene and the odd assortment of items indicates Lounds had been forced to improvise on the fly. Du Maurier wonders what images are contained in the few frames Lounds has taken on the instamatic camera. The cheap phone is clearly a replacement purchased for convenience. Jack Crawford had taken everything of importance though Lounds had assured her in a gush of insidiously solicited pride that her cloud account contained the most delectable details as yet unpublished.

Unpublished perhaps, but secret no longer.

Du Maurier does not doubt the veracity if her claim of sitting down to cappuccino with Hannibal is true. If the Polizia detective Pazzi had sent her sniffing around Clayton's office, then Lounds knows the connection between Graham and Clayton and would likely have posted something Hannibal had found untoward about his precious Graham and the intriguing doctor. Couples' therapy she had said. Hannibal's sense of humor aside, he had actually been honest with Lounds. Clayton has been an effective lens from which to view Graham.

Hannibal had sent her to the Fiore estate in search of Apollo's Temple she had said. So, Hannibal has sent the unsuspecting Cassandra to her doom knowing she would be unable to resist the sound of the siren's song, her own insatiable curiosity the instrument of her demise. Another pawn sacrificed on the board.

Hannibal must have been too busy to make a meal of Lounds himself, very busy if Hannibal had let Lounds escape from his table a second time. The thought festers in the back of Du Maurier's mind.

Lounds is a sore spot, tainted meat and perhaps the experience with Graham has soured the taste for Hannibal.

Du Maurier does not need to see all the pieces of Hannibal’s design to know that the board has shifted too much to accommodate the game much longer. Hannibal’s passion will be his undoing and hers if she does not act soon. Withdrawing from certain social ties would seem prudent if not urgent.

Hannibal assumes she will conform to his game as she always has unaware she has been clearing their board of pawns to claim the prize already hers. One can’t win if one doesn’t know the game. A pity she won’t be around to see Hannibal’s face when he realizes who has played whom.

She picks up her phone. One last pawn to move. She dials Jack Crawford’s number and pours a glass of wine, red this time. She smacks her lips as the crisp finish of the cabernet coats her tongue and thinks of the vintages that wait to be discovered in Provence.

“Good night, Jack.” Price ducks his head in Jack Crawford’s makeshift office as Zeller’s head pops up over his shoulder.

“G’night. See you in the morning.” Jack pauses at the instant frown on Price’s face, “You can come in a little later if you don’t get into too much trouble tonight.”

“Turned that frown upside down.” Price grins. “Thanks. It’s been a long day.”

“You said it.” Jack agrees. “I’m clearing out, too. Did anything turn up on Will’s chains?”

“No fingerprints other than Lecter’s. No surprises there. The chain, manacles, and key are all authentic late fifteenth century smelting.”

“Made right here in Florence.” Zee says.

“Where did he get them? The Uffizi?”

“Close. From the basement of the Palazzo Vecchio. I placed a call there since the Uffizi wasn’t missing anything from their public exhibits.” Zee says.

“The Florentines used the tower as a prison occasionally. The chains he put on Will had once been used on prisoners. In fact…” Price starts but Jack interrupts quickly.

“So Hannibal helped himself to the goodies in the basement where all the overflow is that curators don’t put out for the public.”

“Right. At any given time, a museum displays only a fraction of its holdings, they rotate exhibits around permanent collections, lend stuff out.” Price pouts.

“Still, the stuff in the basement is secured.” Jack insists.

“Obviously, some personnel have access to it.” Zee offers.

“Which personnel?”

"Curators, employees, professors…" Zee pauses as Jack opens his mouth to interrupt.

"Newly hired professors assigned to another section of the museum?"

Price and Zeller glance at each other. "Yes." They say at the same time.

Jack shakes his head. If Hannibal had worked in the Vasari Corridor, he is familiar with all of the museum's holdings from Palazzo Vecchio, to the Uffizi galleries, and to Palazzo Pitti. He is clearly familiar with Boboli Gardens, too.

"Actually, everything used on Will and the arrows pulled from Ruggerio were all part of an upcoming exhibit on Quattrocento implements of torture and surgery." Price says.

"One and the same in Hannibal's hands." Jack says wondering if torture was really Hannibal's intended purpose with Will. "Any hits on the book, *Les Fleurs du Mal*?

"Hannibal's thumbprint on the back cover. Originally printed in 1857, so the one he left with Will is not a first edition, but…" Price stops as Zeller pushes his way in front of him. Price glares up at the ceiling as he is cut off again.

"It's a leather bound reprint thirty years later and get this, Sotheby's sold one similar to ours last month for about three grand." Zee pokes Price's shoulder. "Pretty classy, huh?"

"He left an antique worth three thousand dollars under Will's ass?" Jack says.

"In the dirt, yup." Price raises his pale brows so high his forehead becomes a mass of wrinkles. "And our edition also includes portraits of Baudelaire by Manet and Courbet, so the price would be even more."

"He didn't *borrow* the book from the museum, did he?" Jack says.

"Doubtful. This is purely French history. The original was printed in Paris by Auguste Poulet-Malassis et de Broise. Only in business for six years and published Baudelaire almost exclusively. He printed a much more extravagant version of *Les Fleurs du Mal,* the one our edition is based on, and went broke." Price shrugs.

"How much does one of the first editions of those go for?" Zee asks.

"Almost twenty grand depending on its condition. Didn't know bibliophiles were so savvy, huh?" Price says, wagging a finger.

"I'll bet Hannibal has one of those editions someplace and dropped the pauper's version on Will." Zee says shooing the finger away.

"Well, he essentially gave the book away leaving it like he did. Think there's a message in that?"

Before Jack can answer his phone vibrates in his pocket, Vivaldi's *Spring Concerto* chimes softly as Jack pulls it from his jacket.

"Isn't that Vivaldi?" Price asks.

"Bella's favorite." Jack mumbles as he looks at the screen. "I've got to take this. Go ahead, have some fun, and get your asses in here by nine."

Jack waves off the forensic duo and contemplates the number on his caller ID. It's Du Maurier. He shuts the door to his office and returns to the desk he seems unable to rid himself of this evening.

"Doctor Du Maurier." Jack rasps into the phone, "You're…alive."

"And well, thank you." Du Maurier purrs from her end. "Are you well, Agent Crawford?"

"Feeling better already. Are you going to tell me how you escaped Hannibal this time?"

"That depends."

"On another immunity agreement? I don't think so."

"Another agreement is not necessary. I would think fine tuning the one we have sufficient for both of us."

"Would you care to elucidate?"

"You found the tableau in Boboli this morning with the help of the GPS?"

"Yes. Did you know about Detective Ruggerio?"

"If Detective Ruggerio is the unfortunate saint in the tableau, then no…I did not."

"How did Hannibal get the tracker?"

"First things first. The agreement requires that we redefine what delivering Hannibal entails."

"I'm listening."

"If I provide you with his address and tangible evidence of his crimes, including the intended farce he wishes to parade for you, would that suffice?"

"We will eventually find his residence, with or without your help."

"Eventually may be too late. Do you still believe Graham is your killer?"

"Will was present when Hannibal got hold of the GPS?" Jack is too tired to play games with Du Maurier. She is skating on very thin ice as it is.

"I interrupted dinner, or more accurately...dessert. A prelude to what I might have stumbled upon had I arrived later than I did."

"Okay. You have my attention."

Jack's jaw tightens with the memory of his morning at the crime scene with Will. If Will had the opportunity to approach Hannibal he would have taken it. Will had been genuinely disoriented and confused this morning, shocked and upset when he had come to and found himself shackled to the ground butt naked. Later, when he had acclimated and his mind had cleared, Jack had suspected Will had not been entirely truthful and Jack had understood. He couldn't, not with Ruggerio nailed to a tree and Polizia all over the place. He'd had to play his part for Interpol. But Will had not been gushing with true confessions at the hospital and he doubts Clayton's presence had made any difference. Clayton is Will's new confident and Will keeps him in the loop. Will had been pressing for information for his own filing cabinet. Jack concedes Will does require some autonomy but if Will is playing games…

"What kind of farce are you talking about?"

"I'm sure you've wondered about Hannibal's finances."

"And yours."

Jack listens to Du Maurier take a swallow of a beverage. He imagines the tapered fingers wrapped around the eternally half full glass of wine, the rim smeared with a blush of gloss like the one he had taken from the restaurant.

"Hannibal has access to a substantial portfolio." Du Maurier says after a moment, "He recently transferred a tidy sum into an account in the Cayman Islands…for Will Graham."

"And you know this because…"

"Because the name on the account is Mariah S. Gillam."

Jack has to think a moment before it occurs to him to rearrange the letters. "An anagram. Why would he create an account for Will?"

"Perhaps if I disclosed what happened at Hannibal's villa, where I found the two of them finishing off their second bottle of Masseto Toscana, the picture would become clear. Do you know how much a bottle of Masseto Toscana is, Agent Crawford?"

"A lot?"

"At least the price of the suit you're probably wearing."

"How about you tell me about dinner and I'll check out the account. I'm sure we can agree on a revised understanding of what catching Hannibal entails."

Jack leans back in his swivel chair and sets his heavy shoes on his desk. He pulls out the bottom drawer and helps himself to a coffee mug half full of whiskey.

* * *

"Give his phone to Cordell…oh! Music! We can't have a party without music."

Pazzi slips Graham's phone into the huge paws of Verger's "nurse" and huffs his disappointment at finding nothing else on him. He observes Mason Verger in silence, hands in pockets and feeling relatively safe for the moment because the Casaletto brothers conversing a few feet away are nothing if not vigilant despite the sophomoric practice of seeing who can spit the farthest.

Verger cranes his head to make sure his male nurse follows through. The sound system shakes with a boom as an orchestra blasts from the speakers suspended at intervals from brass fixtures that line the freshly painted and spackled walls. The repairs and lighter color are an improvement considering what the place looked like the last time Pazzi had been here.

Yellow tinged light fills the slaughter pit from the fluorescent tubes overhead recently installed by the Paolini, or so Pazzi assumes as he looks about the pit. Mason Verger has been very busy since he arrived; at least he has laid out the cash to make some impressive alterations to the dated and abandoned facility.

The tubes buzz and they flicker occasionally, the sound like the constant humming of insects. The tired electrical system has been supplemented by a generator, but Pazzi supposes there was only so much that could be done in such a short time. To light every corner of the huge slaughter pit would require a much larger generator than this one. As it is, the center ring of Verger's circus is adequately lit and the unconscious Graham sits, rather stands upright in the spotlight.

"Tano! Bring him over here." Verger's grating voice calls out.

"Ai, but he's moving again." Tano says, walking away from his brother and grabbing the handles to the dolly containing the dozing Graham.

"*Ai! Essere un coglione*! Don't hit him again." Pazzi says. "We want him to recover."

He watches Tano push the dolly across the cement floor of the upper level of the pit that overlooks the ground level where the animals would be, will be at some point this evening. He sets it down directly in front of Verger's wheelchair so that Verger is the first thing Graham will see when he opens his eyes.

Graham had remained largely incapacitated in the car; the hit to his head coupled with the alcohol he had imbibed had left him in a state approaching catatonic. He had not said anything intelligible, but he had tossed and turned in the car as though asleep and dreaming vividly until Tano had decked him. Graham had not moved after that, not even when Tano and his brother Rosso had dragged him from the car and into the slaughter house, face down and head to the ground, bare feet trailing in the dirt.

Pazzi gazes at the slender form dozing on the industrial sized dolly, arms at his sides, strapped in around the biceps, head limp against his chest apparently unaware of his surroundings. He had expected more of a fight from Graham, had been looking forward to it actually, but Graham must be more drunk than Pazzi had realized.

Pazzi could use a drink about now and he lights a cigarette instead. Verger has not shut his mouth for more than a couple minutes since Pazzi had Graham hauled inside and Pazzi is tempted to strangle the man himself. Perhaps he had been prettier before Lecter had got hold of him, but that voice…

The classical music continues to blare from the sound system and Verger grows more animated every minute as he sits conversing with his nurse. He sits primly decked out in a tuxedo, complete with cummerbund and patent leather shoes so shiny Pazzi can see his face in the polished tips if he bends down. The maw of a mouth moves constantly whether words are coming out of it or not and there is a disgusting clicking sound as tendons flex beneath the scar tissue. Verger wears no surgical mask or bandages to protect the raw looking flesh from the dirty humid air that hangs like an oppressive mist. Pazzi thinks Verger hopes to shock Graham when he wakes up. Pazzi is admittedly curious about Graham's reaction. Not as curious as he is about Lecter's whereabouts.

The Paolini pace the perimeter outside, their semi-automatic rifles slung over their massive shoulders as they prowl their assigned areas. Even if Lecter could manage to get past the Paolini, the armed Casaletto brothers are there to provide protection in the pit and that is a most comforting assurance. There is Verger's nurse, although Pazzi imagines his credentials may be overrepresented in that regard.

Cordell, as Verger calls him, is a large man towering over his charge like a moose and his pudgy appearance is remarkably bovine. Despite the huge frame, the fat fingers are surprisingly agile, the touch delicate as he dabs at Verger's drool and fusses with the surgical instruments meant for Graham and Lecter on the stainless steel tray that sits on the ornate coffee table at Verger's side. He has the look of someone familiar with institutions. As an inmate, not staff.

The generator whines and sputters and then a loud bang echoes throughout the pit. Pazzi nearly jumps out of his skin.

"You'll have to get used to that." Verger says, "Been doing it all day. A little scared, aren't you?"

Pazzi narrows his eyes at the lipless mouth. "Edgy is more like it. Aren't you?"

"Oh come now. You'll have to develop a thicker skin than that if you want to play with Lecter."

"About Lecter…and the reward…" Pazzi begins.

"All in good time, *Capo*. The reward is for Doctor Lecter and the belle of the ball hasn't shown up yet."

"You transferred the money?"

"You know, you remind me of the destitute campers on Lake Michigan. I forget how the unwashed masses live a hand to mouth existence."

"Does that mean you transferred the money or not?"

"Everything is in this envelope…" Cordell removes a large envelope from an attaché case on the floor. "…papers, safety deposit box key. You'll get it when I get *il Dottore*, right, Vincenzo? Ha!"

Cordell places the manila envelope on the coffee table, nods and smiles at Pazzi. Pazzi takes another drag on his cigarette and wonders how much Cordell weighs.

"When you get him, *Si, Signor* Verger."

Vincenzo Paolini calls up from the ground level as he crosses the pit careful not to upset the apparatus he and his cousins have spent the last two days building and setting up. *All for show*, Vincenzo thinks, *Unless Il Padrino says different.* He looks to the young man passed out in the dolly above him. He knows this Graham is responsible for Luciano's murder. He killed Bernardo and this Lecter killed Filippo and Lucia. Lecter killed Matteo and Carlo, too.

And he eats human flesh.

As he trudges up the ramp to join Verger on the upper level his mind is preoccupied with thoughts of family. He cannot imagine why *il vecchio uomo* is willing to agree to drop the vendetta, but he will do as *Il Padrino w*ants, whatever that is. Apparently, Elario will be calling him to talk to Graham. He looks again at the limp form sagging against the back of the dolly and wonders what is so compelling about this seemingly unimpressive man that the entire ruse to capture Lecter hinges on him.

“What’s your hurry, *Capo*? The bank doesn’t open until tomorrow anyway. I’d rather you stay and enjoy the party.” Verger says, tongue rolling over the stretched skin like a lizard.

“Not really my kind of party.” Pazzi says tartly, “But since you couldn’t bring the reward in a bag like anyone else would have done, I guess I’ll be celebrating with you.”

“You’re really not much fun, are you, Captain Pazzi.”

Mason would frown at the sour face peering at him if he could. The pretentious Polizia captain is corrupt as they come, but he is so transparently greedy all he can think about is his money. His heart isn’t in it. Maybe he would cheer up if given the chance to poke Graham a bit. Mason thinks it probable that Lecter is lurking about the premises, waiting to make an entrance. Something unexpected would be his style and Mason would prefer to provoke him into revealing himself.

Starting in on Graham should do the trick.

“Now, Doctor Lecter. I’ll say this for him. He knows how to have some fun.” Mason drawls as Cordell swipes saliva from the corner of his mouth.

“And Graham?” Pazzi nods toward the dolly.

“Mr. Graham… He’s got a bit of a temper. But he’s as dry as a martini. His humor often needs a little splash. Cordell?”

“Yes, Mr. Verger?”

Cordell’s voice is like syrup and it coats Mason in sugary warmth every time he speaks to him. Mason doesn’t know what he would do without him. Speaking of martinis, Mason has been looking forward to his. He can’t enjoy them as often as he used to, so his doctors say, but this is a special occasion and he is looking forward to Mr. Graham providing the special ingredient that makes his martinis so exceptional.

“Time for the bucket and my martini.”

Cordell nods, pure pleasure beams from his face as meaty lips spread across his jowls like an open wound.

Pazzi watches Cordell fill a plastic pail with water from the sink behind him. The water spits from the corroded faucet, barely a trickle at first before it explodes in a rust tainted fountain. Cordell lugs the bucket across the cement and douses Graham over the head with the entire contents. Graham shakes his head shuddering under the shower, sputtering and breathing through his mouth in utter astonishment. The look on his face as he opens his eyes to see Verger perched in his wheelchair is everything Pazzi had hoped. He thinks perhaps this is his kind of party.

Graham is positively pissed.

The view from the heating duct is less than ideal but adequate. Hannibal can see Will unobstructed from the front since they moved him directly in front of Mason. Unfortunately, he cannot see Mason’s face from this angle. Hannibal thinks he will be seeing the ravaged visage soon enough. Will had mentioned Mason’s reconstructive surgery wasn’t going well. Hannibal thinks poor Mason might be better off if Hannibal starts from scratch with him.

Hannibal had paused upon entering the yard and had waited until the Paolini planted on the scaffolding outside noticed him. Eventually the pugnacious face had frozen, recognition registering and the two of them had stared at each other for a moment, but the Paolini had offered Hannibal a slow nod and Hannibal had responded in kind before disappearing into the back of the slaughterhouse and into the basement where all the interesting things always are.

While clamoring slowly and quietly through the duct work, Hannibal had missed Pazzi and his boys haul Will from the car into the pit and up the ramp to the upper level where they tied him to the dolly. Will slumps upright within his bonds, cords of simple rope have been laced around his shoulders and upper arms to keep him in place. He has not seemed to register any awareness of his surroundings since Hannibal had settled behind the filthy screen to look down upon the proceedings and Hannibal can only assume he has retreated into his mind. The butt of Pazzi's gun would not have left him unconscious this long. He chooses to twist in his inferno still, conflicted and unpredictable to the last as usual.

Hannibal will have to wait a little longer to see if the cub wants saving or if he wants to surrender to the voices in his head that scream from the depths of his inferno. Hannibal can climb back out the way he came in and leave Will to his inferno. He does not *want* to do that, but he cannot force Will to accept who he is. The time for whispering into the chrysalis has long passed. What will emerge has always been quite beyond Hannibal's control.

When Hannibal had lain in his bed, alone in the villa looking up at the Tuscan sky musing on Will's transformation since leaving him bleeding out on his kitchen floor, wondering if Will would return to him as worthy companion or worthy adversary he had not imagined apathy their enemy. Surrender and suicide are not options Hannibal had imagined Will considering. Hannibal smiles inwardly as he thinks Will's sensitivity the one attribute he has never been able to gage with any accuracy. His empathy leaves him sensitive to the expectations of everyone around him. Strong emotions are what compel us to fulfill another's expectations. Will spends a lot of his time and energy avoiding those expectations and emotions.

Will recognizes his inspirations for what they are; he fears his desires are fuelled by Hannibal's expectations. Unless he can accept those desires as his own, he will succumb to that fear. And all the punishment he has heaped upon himself in his inferno he will allow Mason to visit upon him in the flesh. Clayton understands this about his patient but Hannibal is not sure Will does.

Hannibal shoves these unpleasant thoughts aside for the moment. He sits perched on the event horizon of chaos and as he surveys the slaughter pit he feels the confidence he had felt while talking with Clayton return. Chaos is, after all, a familiar companion, an old friend like Fate. Achilles will have his Patroclus. The swan will have his goose.

Mason's planned activities for this evening are mundane, though more imaginative than Hannibal had expected given the limited lens through which Mason views his universe. Mason is the aspiring composer who has written a few notes and everything that has followed is but a variation on the same stale theme. He believes he has written a symphony tonight.

The surgical instruments arranged on the tray are mostly for show Hannibal thinks. Mason will prick but he will not injure. He wants only enough blood to excite his hogs that wait outside, corralled by the wide gate that leads to the hold where the animals will be forced to walk single file from the hold down a narrow ramp to the recently reinforced pen on the ground level.

Suspended above the pen are huge metal hooks attached to an array of pulleys. Two hooks hang empty and Hannibal can guess who those are meant for. One hook supports an enormous burlap bag of what Hannibal assumes is feed. The cables from the hooks and pulleys twine along the ceiling and lead to another array of levers mounted to the wood panel situated on the upper level to Mason's back. Mason's wheelchair is at the center of his improvised control room. Will sits directly across from Mason. He can see the pit beyond the railing to his left, a wall of windows to his right where the offices are and the control panel behind Mason. If Will lifts his eyes to the air duct over Mason's head he will be looking into the grime covered screen that conceals Hannibal.

Hannibal has been watching Pazzi intently. The man is insufferably pompous. Identifying which of the Paolini is Vincenzo was easy and Hannibal now knows the names of the young men Pazzi brought with him. Hannibal knows with a quiet surety that nearly everyone in this room will be dead or dying very soon.

He watches Mason's erstwhile assistant, the Neanderthal named Cordell, fill up the bucket he holds under the barely functioning faucet and thinks Will about to emerge from his cocoon whether he wants to or not. Affection blooms across Hannibal's lips as Cordell heaves the bucket of water at Will from a safe distance and Will stiffens and shudders with shock at the abrupt change in his environment. He blinks the water from his eyes and glares at Mason. Affection becomes approval. Hannibal knows that look.

How would killing me make you feel?

Righteous…

Patroclus has donned his armor and Achilles could not be more pleased.

Cold water assaults Will's face drenching his head and dribbling down his cheeks and chin. He gasps for air and spits the foul tasting water from his mouth. He smells copper and the cool water tastes of blood. His blood. His head thrums miserably and Will remembers the crack of Pazzi's gun against his skull in Daniel's front yard. He thinks he received another swat for good measure in the back of the car.

He trains his eyes on Mason with some difficulty, his vision blurred by the metallic residue he tries to blink from soaked lashes. He hopes that is why everything appears so fuzzy.

"Mr. Graham. So glad you could join us. What a sight you are."

"Hello Mason. I could say the same about you…but that would be redundant." Will states quietly as he spits another mouthful of blood tinged water onto the floor.

Mason looks hideous. The artificial lighting casts a sickly glow about the room as it is and Mason's flesh appears to be melting right off his face, a putrefying mass that moves. Impossible as it seems, he looks worse than he did when Will left him in Baltimore braced to his bed, Margot at his side. Will thinks him pathetic and comical at once, propped up like a rag doll in his wheelchair ready to watch his hogs devour him and Hannibal, hair stiff as cement and dressed to the nines.

The emperor in the Coliseum, his retinue in tow and unaware of the lion waiting in the shadows.

"So sullen." Mason sniffs, "What…did my sister ever see in you?"

“Opportunity. Doesn’t everyone?”

Will shakes off a drenched lock of hair from his forehead as water continues to drip down his face. His shirt is soaked and someone has thoughtfully already unbuttoned it for him and opened it wide. He shifts his weight around testing his bonds and the sturdiness of the dolly Mason has seen fit to display him on. He glances to his left, takes in the view of the pit and the fixtures Mason has installed. He follows the cables to the control panel behind Mason, an intimidating array of switches and levers if one were unfamiliar with basic physics, but Will is far from unfamiliar and Mason’s design is immediately clear. His eyes track upwards and he focuses on the large square screen that covers the huge air duct intended to supply the workers with fresh air while they slaughtered the animals in the pit below. He thinks there must be a huge fan back there somewhere, but here, by the screen he detects a shadow he thinks should not be there.

Hannibal.

Without changing the expression on his face, he lets his gaze wander back to eye level. The gang is all here. He notes the one Paolini among them, recognizable by the barrel chest and the subordinate position he takes next to Mason and figures the rest must be patrolling outside. He wonders how many there are and how Hannibal got past them.

The ever leering Cordell stands beside a coffee table. The coffee table is cluttered with a tray of ominous looking surgical instruments, an overflowing ice bucket containing a bottle of champagne, a perspiring bottle of imported vodka, a jar of olives, a martini glass, a cluster of long stemmed champagne glasses and…Will thinks a wicker basket of bagged party favors.

Pazzi stands by the wall of windows, leaning against the glass and silently smoking his way through a pack of cigarettes. The other two Will guesses are acquaintances invited by Pazzi. They look related and he knows one of them clocked him in the backseat. Both men gaze back at Will, smirks on their stubbly faces and smelling of aftershave Will can smell from where they stand. How they can wear leather jackets in this heat confounds. Will supposes the aftershave conceals the odor that must lurk beneath the leather. The jackets likely conceal an arsenal, too.

Mason clears his throat, “How rude of me not to make introductions sooner. I’m such an awful host…out of practice. You must be wondering who everyone is.”

Will shrugs and yawns, shakes some more water from his head like a wet dog. He notes the narrowing of Mason’s crazy blue eyes and thinks it won’t take much to set Mason off.

Hannibal is certain Will knows he sits just above Mason over the control panel. There is a gleam in the pale blue eyes every time they wander this way to pass over Mason. Except to offer Hannibal a frontal view of his face, there is no reason to linger on the hunk of moist flesh that is Mason’s face. Watching Will warm Mason up is a rare treat.

Mason has yet to inflict any real pain on Will. Will likely believes Hannibal waits for Mason’s agitation to hit critical mass, but Hannibal waits for Will to get nice and comfy with his instincts. He requires the requisite provocation to ignite the proper impulses, to strike the right chord as it were.

“You already know Cordell and Captain Pazzi.” Mason is saying, “This is Vincenzo Paolini, Carlo’s brother. You remember Carlo, don’t you Mr. Graham? His cousins are outside. And these are the Casaletto brothers, Rosso and Tano, associates of Captain Pazzi.”

Will turns to the Casaletto boys. They really are boys. Early twenties, all swagger and testosterone. Pazzi would turn to hired help with rap sheets rather than have to tie up loose ends within the precinct, like he had with Ruggerio, and tried to do with Alia. Anger begins to collect in his gut, an ember barely a flare, but with every glance in Pazzi's direction the ember grows hotter. His inferno burns closer, too. The walls of the upper level and the slaughter pit below are crawling with ravens, their black claws hooked into the plaster, silent witnesses to this final descent.

"You're going to die, you know." Will says to the stony faces of the Casaletto brothers. "I'm usually right about this sort of thing."

"*Andare a farsi fottere*!" Rosso says.

"Oh, s*to già scopato*." Will says quite seriously, "But don't say I didn't warn you."

"Well, we're all going to die." Mason says, "Some of us sooner than others. How do you like what I've done with the place?"

"Can't say I approve of the changes you've made since the last time I was here." Will says.

"No praise for my ingenuity? I sense negativity in the air."

"That would be contempt."

"Ha! Well…you are contemptible." Mason cackles.

"My contempt is boundless." Will agrees. "Quite a contraption you have here, but not particularly impressive."

"It will get the job done. An improvement on the maze I had before. The pigs will be excited and antagonized by the activity in the ring. You think you have it figured out?" Mason's brows rise to the spiked blond bangs heavy with gel that shines like Vaseline.

"I think someone else deserves the credit. Not your design is it?"

Mason's brows knit together and he clucks his tongue. Cordell dutifully dabs the drool. Pazzi lights another cigarette and thinks he was smart to bring an extra pack. He glances at his watch since Verger apparently has no sense of time whatsoever. He wonders how much longer this is going to take and thinks he will grab that envelope first chance he gets. Graham is correct about the Casaletto brothers. Unfortunately, the Paolini will catch the flak for that. Pazzi thinks to be long gone.

"Where's Doctor Lecter?" Mason snaps.

Will shrugs. "He's not here? Well, I am disappointed. I told Rinaldo I gave him the night off. Not my turn to watch him."

Pazzi pushes off from the windows where he has been leaning and straightens up, "You don't watch him. He watches you. He's already here. Where is he?"

"He's waiting for us to blink." Mason says.

"Still playing chicken, Mason?" Will says.

“You are deliberately insulting, Mr. Graham. Captain Pazzi, why don’t you remind Mr. Graham to mind his manners.”

“We can all play nice in the sandbox, can’t we?” Pazzi says on his way over not particularly pleased to be ordered about by Verger, but not especially annoyed, either. He doesn’t mind the chance to knock Graham senseless...again.

Will braces himself, not sure where Pazzi is going to belt him, but certain he is going to feel knuckles someplace vulnerable. Pazzi’s fist lands in his solar plexus and Will would sink to his knees but for the ropes. Instead he sags under his own weight, unable to catch his breath for several seconds. Unbelievably, Pazzi strikes again, and Will hisses in pain, cries out as his stomach erupts in a fresh cascade of agony and his chest constricts in the absence of oxygen. He thinks he might throw up, but he doesn’t.

Hannibal raises a brow as he watches Will double over in the dolly. His jaws tighten as Cordell approaches Will, yanks his head up by his hair and swipes a slim strip of tissue along wet lashes. Cordell promptly deposits the tissue paper into the martini he has poured. He slips a plastic spear full of stuffed olives into the glass and Mason watches it slide to the bottom with undisguised relish.

Hannibal looks back to Will who has recovered somewhat. He has managed to push himself upright again though he takes ragged breaths, likely swallowing down the vomit burning his throat. His curls are a matted mess, his shirt sticks to his body like wet drapery. Brow furrowed, eyes blinking back tears, he stares at Mason with lips set in a thin red line as he huffs through his nose. He is absolutely stunning. So vulnerable, so dangerous, so infuriatingly…Will.

“Thank you, Cordell. Ah…” Mason takes a sip from the straw Cordell holds to his lips.

Hannibal thinks Mason’s celebratory cocktail premature. He begins to back his way out of the duct. Vincenzo has been playing with his phone. And Cordell is far too attached to those surgical instruments.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 78
Hannibal quotes from and Daniel alters a verse from the Iliad, Book XVIII
Will and Hannibal use quotes between Achilles and Patroclus in the Iliad, Book XVI
Did I solicit thee to promote me? Milton’s Paradise Lost.

Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Achilles joins his Patroclus inside the walls of Troy. Elsewhere, Jack Crawford, our erstwhile Menelaus is getting a little tired of being yanked around.

“Doctor Lecter, I presume.” Mason drawls, the irritating Graham quickly becoming a footnote now that the source of all his woe stands in a pose of surrender before him. Papa…would be proud.

“Buona sera, Mason.” Hannibal says curtly and Mason blinks, momentarily mute.

As Mason quakes in the presence of greatness, Hannibal turns and his eyes alight upon his beleaguered Will and a flicker of affection ripples along the thin lips. Pale blue eyes glare up at him from beneath wet bangs as the stubbly chin lifts…defiantly.

“Hello, Will.”

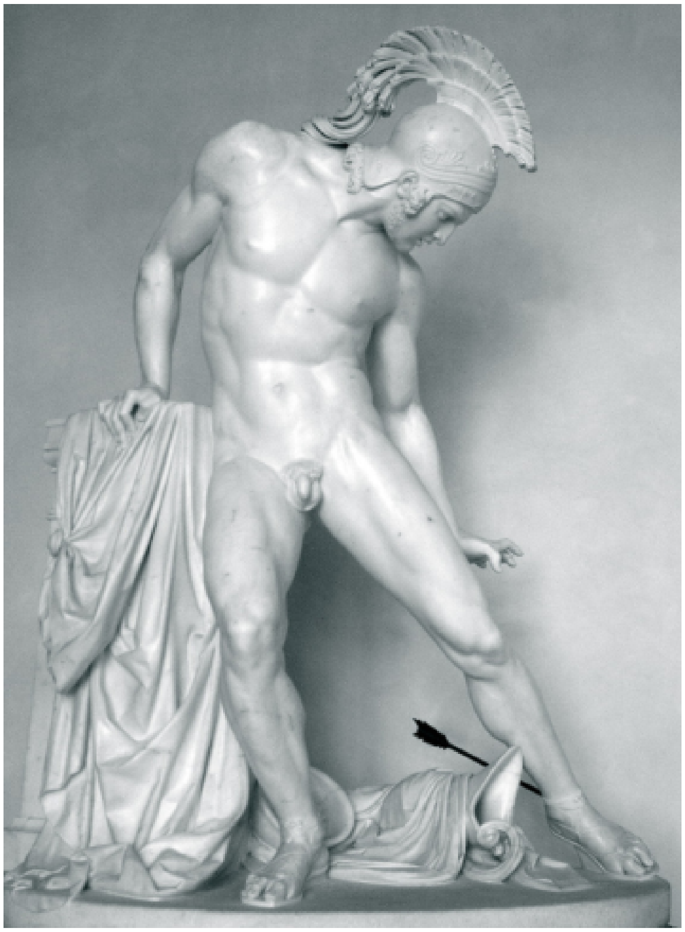
“Hannibal.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 79

Achilles joins his Patroclus inside the walls of Troy. Elsewhere, Jack Crawford, our erstwhile Menelaus is getting a little tired of being yanked around.



Achilles, Innocenzo Fraccaroli, 1872

Achilles ranged everywhere with his spear, like a conflagration racing through the deeply-wooded gullies on a parched mountain-side, its whirling flames driven by the wind through the close-packed trees, and with the force of a god he beat down those he killed till the black earth ran with blood. Proud Achilles' horses trampled dead men and shields alike as grain is swiftly trampled under the feet of the broad-browed bellowing oxen a farmer yokes to tread white barley on a stone threshing floor. The axle and the chariot rim were black with blood thrown up by the hooves and the wheels as the son of Peleus pressed on to glory, his all-conquering arms spattered with gore.

Iliad, Book XX

Will's head feels like a spinning top, or rather the room is the spinning top and he wobbles in its vortex as his lungs constrict against his aching ribs. His eyes blink back the moisture that swells with the debilitating spike seeming lodged in the cluster of nerves under his ribcage. Breathing hurts and he thinks Pazzi's last punch stopped just short of rupturing something. It is Pazzi who stands closest to him of all the people in the room and his tall lean figure looms before Will's eyes, the smoke from his eternally lit cigarette sending waves of nausea and Will thinks swallowing the sour spit collecting under his tongue will send him to spewing up dinner.

Pazzi's head swivels away from Will not because he doesn't want to look at the saliva that dribbles down his chin but because Pazzi isn't focused on Will. His fingers are frozen around the forgotten wand of grey ash as he glowers at Mason and Cordell, the creases in his face sharp and greased with sweat.

Will understands the leaden expression.

He had worn a similar expression when the Verger meat packing heiress had shown up at his house bearing a bottle of whiskey. He had been more than a little chary of the instant chumminess they had developed, but his brooding frown had softened as Margot had told her tales of torment. They had shared that bottle of whiskey and their private carnage in his living room and eventually his bed. His imagination had run rampant as she had talked, a broken and lovely doll, drolly describing the abuse she had suffered at her brother's hand culminating with Mason's sordid associations with chocolate and of course, the celebratory consumption of another's pain.

Misery loves company, and Mason drowns his secret sorrows in Stolichnaya laced with tears teased from the targets of his special brand of abuse, delighting in the joy that comes with hurting. Hurting fills the empty space the alcohol cannot.

Another irony he had found Mason sitting in the same chair, finally full of himself.

Pazzi is also a bully replete with many of Mason's hallmark tendencies. Will is familiar with Pazzi's vindictiveness. He enjoyed knocking the wind out of Will just now, but the enjoyment is rooted in simple insecurities defined in simple terms; mainly asserting masculinity soaked in diffidence. Will offends his narrow definition of masculinity and Will admits that Pazzi harbors a healthy dose of righteous anger for Will's seeming talent for avoiding arrest.

Mason's pathology represents quite the different brand of brutality. The sight of Cordell soaking up salty drops from Will's trembling eyelid and slipping the tear laden tissue paper into Mason's martini has momentarily short circuited Pazzi's brain. Pazzi has no frame of reference for Mason's behavior, no wounds of his own carved into his flesh or his mind from which to begin to commiserate. Pazzi does not know what it is to bleed emotion from every pore.

Sometimes it's the little things that spark epiphanies. The tear garnished martini was evidently Pazzi's last straw. The snapping of that straw resonates all over Pazzi's face. Pazzi has realized he is partying with the Mad Hatter and Pazzi wants more than anything to scramble back up the rabbit hole.

Well, almost anything. His eyes do not wander far from the manila envelope Mason keeps close. Agamemnon has his own Achilles' heel. A weakness that has been the cause of enough carnage to suit Will and has already provided the ingredients for one gratuitous meal. Greed is one of the seven deadly sins, Pazzi has no idea how deadly sin can become. Will is aware he passes judgement on Pazzi and decides playing God does feel good.

I discovered a truth about myself when I tried to have you killed.

That doing bad things to bad people makes you feel good?

Will lifts his head higher to see into the metal air duct above Mason's head and squints into the darkened screen to find the golden hued eyes rimmed with blood peering back at him. The opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth blast again and the flock of skittish ravens scatters. Freshly spackled plaster walls crackle with flames that smolder before Will's eyes, his inferno encroaches from every corner, every crevice.

As though awakened by Pazzi's assault, Will feels the slithering thing inside stir beneath the scar. He glances down at his exposed torso and the jagged line of his wound seems to pulse with the beat of his heart. Filaments of anticipation thread through him like the tickling of spider legs.

Fuck, Will. What if you have an episode and the Paolini have hold of you?

Daniel's fear was well founded. As the Fates would have it, an episode seems inevitable, if not imminent. He is overstimulated, his nerves burn with sensation while his mind absorbs every detail of his immediate surroundings and memory like destiny flies and swims in their tumultuous sea of blood and emptiness. Everybody's settling in for dinner…

Mason eyes the sperm donor coldly as the deaf maestro's masterpiece invigorates. He has waited for this moment for months; suffering one skin graft after another while Graham cavorted around Florence on his dime. And there had been Margot to contend with. He had met her heavily lacquered eyes every morning, borne her silent accusations caught in a mouth twisted in a perpetual snarl. Mason had known his twin had counted the weeks, sad little hen she was and, as the season of her happy delivery drew near, the barren womb inside had clamored for the stolen prize sending fresh streams of tears down her lovely face, and Mason had been drunk on martinis.

As he watches color return to Graham's listless face while vodka drivels into the napkin Cordell patiently holds against his chin he feels a deep sense of contentment. Graham will die never knowing his contribution to the Verger dynasty was neither squandered nor thrown out like refuse.

"You're lacking in social grace, Mr. Graham. You'll mind your manners now, won't you?"

Mason's voice interrupts the music and the stream of memories surging through Will's skull. Will nods with eyes closed, shudders and coughs playing to Mason's expectations and wondering at the capricious Sisters of Fate who seem to weave their way through his layered reality.

Let Fate decide? Is that what you did, Will?

Hannibal knows the way Will thinks.

That is what happens, Hannibal. It is Fate that Patroclus and Achilles die.

Not according to Hannibal.

Our Iliad is yet to be written.

Homer's Achilles bows to the Fates in the *Iliad*, understands that avenging Patroclus means his own death will follow, but this Achilles shakes his furious fist at the Fates and would write his own ending. The screen above bulges with the immense bulk of the creature, the gloss of shiny feathers gleams bright and Will knows Hannibal is no longer ensconced in the air duct.

When the moment comes will you do what needs to be done?

Achilles left his Patroclus in Baltimore and has mourned him for a year. He tempts Fate again if Patroclus will allow it. None of this is Mason's design; it's Hannibal's and he would have Will share in it. No interruptions and no witnesses. Just pure hunting. Zeus is not punishing Prometheus tonight, he is courting his goose.

"Mr. Verger…"

Pazzi's voice comes from his left and Will angles his head in that direction. It's difficult to hear everyone with the music blaring. Mason has Beethoven's famous Fifth on a continuous loop, but only the first movement…over and over again. The Casaletto boys lean against the railing, arms folded over their jacketed chests and Vincenzo Paolini glances up now and again from his phone. He has been texting off and on the entire time. What is Hannibal up to?

“Perhaps you’ve already informed the Paolini of your party plans this evening, but I’m still wondering how all this…” Pazzi’s arms open in a helpless gesture, “is supposed play out.”

“You lack vision.” Mason snaps.

The straw slips back into the glass and the silent Cordell takes the martini away. Mason moves his jaw around, ligaments clicking as the bright blue eyes stir and shift slowly from Graham to roll lazily over Pazzi’s stylish suit. His face a grimace of concentration, Mason lifts the heavy lids to Cordell.

“Bring Mr. Graham up nice and close won’t you, Cordell?” Mason drawls as Cordell dabs once before walking over to the dolly. To Pazzi he says, “Well, that’s what you get coming late to the party.”

Pazzi catches the concerned looks from the Casaletto brothers. Their impassive faces cannot disguise the growing revulsion mirrored in their deep brown eyes at the tuxedo clad monstrosity in the wheelchair. Pazzi offers them a nod and a wink of encouragement. He will need them to cover him when his chance to grab that envelope presents itself. Pazzi strokes at his beard. If he goes for the envelope next time Cordell becomes preoccupied with Graham, Vincenzo might take a shot at him though he knows the Paolini prefer knives. They also prefer to avoid law enforcement, but Pazzi does not think he qualifies as such any more in the Paolini’s eyes.

That thought is a sobering one and while getting in a couple good licks on Graham was satisfying, Pazzi would prefer shooting Graham outright rather than watch him tortured by Verger. Pazzi likes things clean. Pazzi does not want to be associated with the remains of the gruesome demise Verger has planned whatever that is though being torn apart by his pigs seems to be part of it.

He had hoped to avoid seeing Lecter altogether believing it better not to get too close to the devil. Since Verger is intent on making him stay Pazzi has to concede his curiosity is aroused provided he can look upon Baltimore’s abomination neatly outfitted in handcuffs or rope.

He moves aside as Cordell rolls the dolly containing Graham past him. Graham’s chest still heaves and he grunts with every spasm, shirt opened and stomach muscles contracting in plain sight. Graham took the punches pretty well considering his wound. The crooked scar Pazzi had barely glimpsed in the FBI van at Luciano’s crime scene had blazed like a cruel smile across Graham’s stomach as he had lain stretched out upon the ground in front of Ruggerio and Pazzi had expected to land his fist in softer flesh. Graham has done his best to return his body to its previous condition although there is not much he can do about the scars and bruises that he has collected.

Pazzi thinks the external scars are nothing compared to the mental wounds that afflict Graham. Even now, he glares at Verger through slits with a quiet malevolence. After what Graham did to Bernardo Paolini, Pazzi thinks it was good idea to tie him to the dolly. It occurs to Pazzi that Graham never asked which Paolini he had killed.

“Mr. Graham could probably tell you what I cooked up, if he can speak.” Mason’s eyes dip in Will’s direction as Cordell parks the dolly so his knees are flush with Will’s almost touching. “You know what’s in store for you, don’t you?”

Will's mind invariably recreates the nightmare he found in his living room upon waking from the nightmare he had just left hanging from the beams at Muskrat Farm.

Hey Winston… Mason?

I adopted some dogs from the shelter. I had them in a cage together with no food and fresh water. One of them died hungry. The other had a warm meal. I should have put you in a cage with Dr. Lecter. I'm curious what would've happened.

"A couple…starving dogs…in a cage?" Will gasps, wincing as stomach muscles convulse.

"Ah…you remember. My memory of events is more accurate than you would like. Quite accurate."

"Memory…is a…selective process." Will's words fall in a soft hiss and he drops his head with the effort.

Mason looks over Graham as he slumps in his bonds. Unable to drop to his knees, Graham is forced to endure his recovery standing up and the satisfaction of watching Graham struggle for every breath with a diaphragm knotted in pain warms his cockles, or would if he could feel them. Even drenching wet and twisting in discomfort Graham paints an uncannily attractive picture and thoughts of dismembering each alluring attribute bring a tingle to his scalp.

There is the matter of the scar that mars Graham's midsection and Mason scrutinizes Graham's torso, noting the length of Lecter's lurid signature. He had read Lecter used a linoleum kitchen knife to open Graham up, but had miraculously missed slicing into vital organs. Mason thinks there was nothing miraculous about it.

And when he offered you the knife what did you imagine then?

What did I imagine with Carlo and Mason at my back? I imagined what would happen if I cut you down. It seemed the only way we were going to leave alive.

You said we.

Yes… Us…

You couldn't imagine leaving without me?

Doctor Lecter is obsessed with Graham almost as much as himself. The photographs of the murder tableau he received this morning attest to that. He posed the sperm donor like a shackled snack. Mason recognizes ownership when he sees it. It's the same with his hogs. Mason decides when to slaughter them, no one else. He wonders if he will at long last send the unflappable Doctor Lecter's heart a flutter when Cordell starts slicing off tasty bits of Graham.

Not too much, though. There has to be enough of him to last a while in the pit. Mason smacks his jaws together and Cordell's thick fingers produce the straw. Mason sucks hard and drains the martini, savoring the ice cold vodka while watching the tissue paper swirl finally settling beside the olives at the bottom of the crystal. He opens his mouth to Cordell and Cordell places the sliver of tissue on his tongue.

Will watches the parody of communion and wonders how transubstantiation works according to the Gospel of Mason. As Mason devours the olives Cordell feeds him, the Eucharist celebrated, Will thinks a sermon is forthcoming.

“If memory serves, it was you who told me it was Doctor Lecter I should be feeding to my pigs.”

“You got it half right. I wasn’t supposed to be there.”

“All you had to do was make him bleed. But, you cut him down”

“You would have killed us both, Mason.”

“You released the beast.”

“You…had it coming.”

Do you think it was Margot's idea to have an heir? You think it was your idea to take it from her? My idea to come here and kill you?

Mason’s eyes narrow. Lecter had manipulated all three of his patients, had played conductor to the trio, but Graham’s anger over Margot’s loss of her lady parts had been genuine. Graham’s idea or not, Mason thinks it perhaps wise not to bring any of that up. Reminding him of Lecter’s more weighty transgressions will fan the flames back where they belong.

“You didn’t escape the beast. Grabbed him by the horn but he gored you.” Mason licks at skin slowly, suggestively, “The devil ravaged his little pet in Baltimore, tore you up real good, didn’t he? Addicted to each other. What game are you playing with him now, Mr. Graham?”

“With him? It’s your party, Mason. What game do you think we are playing?”

Mason pauses to consider and to breathe. He huffs through his mouth impatiently. His breathing becomes shallow when he gets excited; emotions churn and get him worked up. His doctors prescribe an assortment of pharmaceuticals to keep him calm, Mason gobbles up his meds but Mason prefers the pleasant buzz alcohol brings. Enjoying a cocktail with his eyes closed takes him back to life before Lecter, the associations that come with the taste make him feel secure and comfortable though he misses the sensation of the cool crystal upon his lips as he drinks.

He squints at the captive Graham beneath the shower of overhead light and thinks the strange and violent game Graham and Lecter play remains an elaborate game of chicken. They maim and kill their way along for sport much like gamers blazing through the levels of one of those video games; collecting trophies, saving the princess, and eventually slaying the dragon. Mason thinks the two of them enjoy their amusements too much to end the game. Well, their destructive diversion is about to come to a brutal and satisfying end.

“You and Doctor Lecter have your own rules. I think you enjoy almost killing each other and you don’t care about the collateral damage. That’s why Lecter will come. He reserves the pleasure of killing you for himself.”

“Killing him?” Pazzi says, “I thought Graham was well…amorous bait.”

“He is.”

“But the hearts in the tableaux.” Pazzi protests, “They’ve been sending each other valentines. Bodies wrapped like the cannibal equivalent of chocolates. *Porca madosca, eh?* He left Graham alive while he killed my detective.”

Pazzi looks to Will wondering still what part Crawford's crazy profiler played in Ruggerio's death. The actual murder and the tableau. He thinks both Graham and Lecter capable of manipulating evidence and the thought that everything he and Crawford have been looking at is a clever illusion sticks liked a rusty nail in the back of his head.

"Did Lecter kill your detective? Or did they kill him together like they did the Paolini in the alley? Or how they ganged up on me? Who knows? Captain Pazzi, this twisted game they play excludes everyone else. It defies explanation. That's why the pit is designed to accommodate their peculiar proclivities."

Mason's eyes never leave Will's as he speaks. Will watches errant black feathers fall about Mason covering him like a drape while the tongue wags along exposed gum and teeth. Mason is intoxicated…with himself.

"Which are?" Pazzi looks over the railing into the hay covered pit below, considers the two suspended hooks.

"Killing. Each other. Haven't you been listening? Oh…they dance around it, but their mutual infatuation is really about dominance."

Will chews at his lower lip listening to Mason pontificate while Pazzi scratches his head. Talons tear through the screen above and blood trickles down the wall behind Mason's head to pool beneath his wheel chair and Cordell's feet. Death hovers over Mason's sequined lapels like a swarm of flies.

"You're going to force them to fight each other in the pit?" Pazzi asks.

He is intrigued and somewhat excited by the prospect of watching the two of them tear each other apart in a struggle to survive. Mason has made his slaughter pit into a miniature Coliseum and made modern day gladiators of Graham and Lecter. Mason Verger is as deranged and dangerous as the men he hates.

Pazzi snorts and chuckles to himself thinking of Graham's pointed remark about Caligula. Mason Verger had fed his own face to Graham's dogs. It is Graham who will be fed to the dogs or pigs as it were, before the crazed emperor now. Pazzi wonders again at what must be in the water back in Baltimore to produce such malignant souls.

"Suspended from hooks over the hogs." Mason clucks his tongue and the lipless skin stretches wider, a lizard baring its teeth. "I guessed their respective weights and hung the feed bag as a counter weight. They'll fight because, like I told you, remaining in the pit too long is unwise."

"I'm not following how this works Mr. Verger."

Will sighs and turns to Pazzi as trumpets and violins blare from the vibrating sound system. The minor key signature lends an ominous tone to an atmosphere already steeped in tension. Will gathers that Pazzi had not planned on attending Mason's party and agitation plays about his mouth though his fingers try to massage it away with every stroke to his beard.

"He controls the feed bag on a separate pulley apparatus." Will says, his lungs functioning close to normal now, "It's balanced against our combined weight, more or less, and it will drop if our weight is shifted. But, it's not the feed that the pigs want. He'll give us time and knives to wound, maim, and ultimately cut the other down. One falls to the pigs while the other climbs to the cat walk up there. He might even be able to dodge the snipers. Right Mason?"

Mason's face curdles with delight as Pazzi cranes his neck to scan the ceiling.

"The one who doesn't fall into the pit gets shot?" Pazzi says.

"Not right away." Mason's voice cackles above the bray of bassoons. "He gets a chance to run before becoming dinner…at my table. I wager it'll be Doctor Lecter. Care to place a bet?"

Pazzi wets his dry lips and swipes a bottle of water from the iced filled cooler aside the coffee table. "I'll pass." He turns to Will as he glugs, "The odds are not in your favor, Mr. Graham."

"Never are." Will shrugs. "The game is not fixed."

"Yes it is. The beast is coming and he is the beast. He opens his mouth and poison comes out. I intend to pour the wrath of God down his throat. Oh…but not before everyone opens their party favors. Viennese chocolates…homage to Beethoven." Mason's eyes scan the room in anticipation of the gratitude that does not come.

Cordell dips a paw into the wicker basket and retrieves one of the ornately tied purple paper pouches and holds it up. Its sides bulge with the hard edges of chocolate bars and crinkle with curls of lavender ribbons. Pazzi frowns and Will knows he finds Mason as ridiculous as he does.

"I brought plenty for everyone." Mason croons happily.

Lurid grin slips to a scowl, a vision of flesh melting as Mason notices no one approaches Cordell to collect a goody bag. An indignant pucker manifests between the blond brows and Mason sucks on his tongue. The head of shiny gelled spikes turns its eyes to Pazzi. "How about the youngsters you brought?"

The Casaletto brothers exchange glances realizing the crazy rich cripple in the chair is referring to them and a leather sleeve reaches out tentatively for the bag of trinkets and expensive chocolates Cordell clutches. As the brothers dig around the decorous paper sack, Will watches Vincenzo Paolini carefully and thinks he must be communicating with his relatives outside. Mason has to be aware of Vincenzo's frequent digressions. Will shifts his feet as the Fifth queues up from the beginning again and guitars blow suddenly, incongruously through his head, edging out the sounds of the symphony. *Mirrors on the ceiling, pink champagne on ice…*

"In the master's chambers they're gathered for the feast. They stab it with their steely knives but they just can't kill the beast." Will whispers to himself.

"What's that…the Bible? Revelations?" Mason's brows wrinkle.

"Dante?" Pazzi offers.

"Eagles…" Will turns to Pazzi and the Casaletto brothers, "We're all prisoners here. You can check out but you can never leave."

Both brothers pause in their lip smacking enjoyment of the milk chocolate and agitated glances are exchanged all around.

"What's he talking about?" Rosso says.

Pazzi winks at the boys, ashes his cigarette and turns his large brown eyes to Will. He recognizes the song reference now though judging by the distant look on Graham's face as he seems to gaze at nothing in particular, he figures Graham is likely not even in the room at this moment. Pazzi wonders if the trances he puts himself in to view crime scenes ever happen randomly, without the conscious effort. It sure seems like it.

"Hearing voices calling from far away, eh Graham?" Pazzi says flatly to chuckles from Rosso and Tano.

"Quoting devil's music…I don't listen to that stuff anymore." Mason says, "I thank God I survived what happened to me. A transforming experience. I've reevaluated my priorities and I've found Jesus…and salvation. Do you have faith, Mr. Graham?"

"I have faith in fools. I think it's called self-confidence."

"I think it's called delusional." Pazzi says with a quick smirk.

"I think it's his self-deprecating sense of humorlessness." Mason says.

Will lifts his head to peer into the sutured and scarred flesh. Mason's face is close enough for Will to see blood vessels pulse beneath the healthier bits of grafted skin, blue veins thread across the thin coating of flesh so translucent that bones are barely concealed as Mason's mouth moves. His exposed teeth seem to bite on every word. Will does not wonder at the wicked thoughts that must pass through Mason's addled mind as the wild blue eyes peer into Will's undamaged visage and Will's skin crawls beneath the hateful gaze.

Will is certain Mason intends to wreak his vengeance on his face.

"God gave us our scars and you've got plenty. They are mementos of our mistakes."

"Like the scars you gave Margot? I caused my own scars and so did you."

"Margot…Margot….Margot!" The wild blue eyes roll to the ceiling and the Adam's apple bobs along the pale throat, "Margot flagrantly disregarded our father's wishes. Broke an important commandment I believe…honor thy parents."

"That's not why you…hurt her."

"Not entirely, no. She would have tried to kill me…again."

"And why would anyone want to kill you, Mason?"

"I don't like your sarcasm. If I had my druthers, you'd already be fodder for my hogs, but I'll have my salvation before I send you off to hell."

"Way ahead of you, Mason…"

The blond brows furrow with consternation. Mason has never found Graham particularly pleasant to talk to. Their conversations have been few and he thinks Graham drier than his martinis, certainly more morose than Margot…no easy feat. There is nothing fun about Graham. At all.

"Well, you won't be alone. Ha! Leaving Doctor Lecter to the FBI and the courts is unacceptable; he'd win an insanity plea. Justice should be left to the injured party."

“Vengeance is not justice. Believe me, I know the difference.” Will says.

“Ha! That’s rich coming from you. For the day of vengeance was in my heart and my year of redemption has come!” The great maw hangs open, tongue twitching obscenely like the sacrilege it speaks.

“Nothing more dangerous than religion. You’ve been transformed by your paralysis. You’ve become God’s mouthpiece, Mason?” Will says catching Pazzi’s solemn glance.

“Oh…let he who is without sin cast the first stone. Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”

“I hear someone in love with the sound of his own voice. That’s not God talking to you.”

“All things are possible with God. He who follows Jesus does not walk in darkness, and I have seen the light. Don’t tell me you wouldn’t like a piece of him for carving you up like a steak.”

“This…isn’t a confessional.”

“But it is a show and tell. We have been scarred, both of us.”

“Scars are the only thing we share, Mason. Oh…and the same psychiatrist.”

“Who do you serve, Mr. Graham? You can’t serve God and Mammon. I serve Jesus and He will raise me up from this chair and smite my enemies.”

Will chokes out a laugh, it’s harsh and it hurts, but it hurts less than it did a few minutes ago. “How hard it is for the rich man to enter the kingdom of God. There’s no redemption when you smite your enemies yourself, Mason. Or pay others to do it for you.”

“What about when you eat them?” Mason’s tongue flicks over his teeth and eyes crease with provocation.

“Are you planning on…eating me?”

“You? No. I think Doctor Lecter will be forced to leave you to my pigs to watch in envy as they finish off what he intended for himself. But, I think it fitting he have a little nibble of you first. Cordell?”

Cordell appears beside Will and begins to wrap cords of rope around Will’s legs, just above the knees leaving Will immobile except for his arms below his elbows and some forward movement of shoulders and neck. Cordell ties off the rope grinning up at Will the entire time and retreats to Mason’s side. He leans over the coffee table and makes a show of wringing his hands around one of the terry towels he gleans from the neatly folded stack piled next to the array of surgical instruments.

“An eye for an eye eh, Mr. Graham? Cordell is going to slice off the tip of your nose…”

“Ran out of donors?” Will says eyes following the scalpel Cordell grasps in his fat hands.

“Considered using more than just your nose, but Cordell determined we aren’t a match. Too bad. But, I don’t have to take your nose. I can take the tip of something else. The hogs require a little scent to get them started. I understand you’re not circumcised. Is that true?”

Will invariably shifts in his bonds as images of his own genital mutilation flash before his eyes. He looks at Pazzi whose face remains impassive behind clouds of smoke. Mason could have gotten his hands on crime scene photos, but not without assistance. Will rolls his eyes thinking it doesn't matter. He's not going to play this game with Mason.

"I'm not choosing between a sloppy circumcision and a nose job, Mason."

Will averts his head as Cordell's thick chest rubs against his face and surprisingly warm hands take hold of his jaw. He forces Will's head toward him, scalpel poised at eye level so the gleam of surgical steel is mirrored in both their eyes.

"*Signore* Verger!" A thickly accented voice calls from below, "We've got *il dottore*. Found him outside by the basement door, by the service elevator."

"Oh! Well…bring him up!" Mason says as Cordell drops his arm awaiting further instructions.

Will breathes an audible sigh of relief at this temporary respite and listens to two pair of shoes trudge up the ramp to the second level as his gut twitches tightening around the thing coiled inside and the walls continue to drip blood. The furnace of his inferno blazes all around, only the control area and the slaughter pit below escape Will's volcanic visions.

The dark curly head of one of the Paolini appears at the top of the incline, as does a very smug faced Hannibal. He holds his hands over his head prodded by the rifle nestled in his side. Despite the tacky artificial lighting that casts an eerie pallor over him, Will thinks Hannibal's arrogance unmatched. He stands before Mason as though he walked up the ramp alone, as though he is here by design, which Will supposes is exactly how Hannibal sees it.

The last time Mason saw the good doctor in person was out of the back of Carlo's flatbed truck. Still hallucinating but cognizant of leaving Graham's little hovel, Mason remembers snips of conversation through crinkling plastic wrap. Doctor Lecter then, as now is the epitome of fashion, a creature of exquisite taste in most regards, except his choice of company.

Hannibal levels his head, assumes a comfortable stance and glances quickly at Vincenzo. The grizzled brow rises slightly offering as much confirmation as Hannibal requires before creasing again in concentration, eyes fixated on his phone. Satisfied, Hannibal peruses his immediate surroundings, noting the placement of people and objects and estimating the paces between them. He assumes Will has already done the same.

"Doctor Lecter, I presume." Mason drawls, the irritating Graham quickly becoming a footnote now that the source of all his woe stands in a pose of surrender before him. Papa…would be proud.

"*Buona sera*, Mason." Hannibal says curtly and Mason blinks, momentarily mute.

As Mason quakes in the presence of greatness, Hannibal turns and his eyes alight upon his beleaguered Will and a flicker of affection ripples along the thin lips. Pale blue eyes glare up at him from beneath wet bangs as the stubbly chin lifts…defiantly.

"Hello, Will."

"Hannibal."

Will notes the flare of nostrils, the nearly imperceptible glint in the dilation of dark eyes at the pleasure of hearing his name spoken aloud, an intimacy always uttered in private offered now in a gesture of camaraderie. Feathers rustle between the churn of violins as flames engulf the walls and Will welcomes the madness. He rests his head against the cold metal behind him and offers a wan broken smile.

“Here’s another nice mess you’ve gotten me into.” Will says.

“A hell of a mess.” Hannibal agrees staring into the face with the power to contort him into knots.

Mason’s eyes crease with suspicion. “Welcome to hell, but *my* deliverance is nigh.”

“Very true.” Hannibal says. “Found religion, Mason? I see you brought candy. Been walking with Papa among the campers?” Hannibal glances about the enclosure as though seeing it for the first time.

Will’s attention shifts from Hannibal to Mason who sits with sagging maw staring at the beast whose poison sent him to mutilating himself and who drips with fresh venom now. Pazzi pats his pockets, fingers unable to shake out a cigarette quickly enough. Vincenzo glances up from his phone and pauses to survey the scene playing out in his family’s abandoned slaughter house with what Will perceives as a surprising lack of animus.

An emotional moment for Mason, he begins to hyperventilate and Cordell quickly unveils the oxygen tank sequestered behind the wheelchair. Mason sucks hard at the oxygen mask Cordell has provided his master until his breaths become less shallow. Hannibal watches the feeble Mason feed upon his tube with transparent contempt, his usual expression of disingenuous curiosity clearly not injurious enough. He had hoped for a coughing fit or mild seizure at the very least.

“My father is dead.” Mason lets the tube drop, “A boy’s illusions are no basis for a man’s life are they, Doctor Lecter? There are no illusions here.”

“Nothing illusive about your face.”

“Admiring your handiwork, Doctor Lecter? How do you like my face?”

“It suits you, Mason. And…you did all that handiwork yourself.” Hannibal says benignly from behind cold dark orbs. “Except for snapping your neck. Looks like God received a little help in directing that blind fury you spoke of.”

“My little piggies are going to whine EEEEE EEE EEEE all the way home with full bellies this time.” Mason says, “Cojones and all.”

Animosity hangs like a carcass between them, swinging back and forth as Mason and Hannibal eye one another. Hannibal looks down at the cask of flesh that Mason Verger has become. He takes in Mason’s outlandish suit, the sequins, the ostentatious purple silk bow tie, and the buffed patent leather shoes.

“Love the suit, Mason. Already dressed for the undertaker, haven’t you?”

“I’ve missed your dark humor. Mr. Graham has no sense of humor.” Mason says increasingly ruffled by the conceit. Still, banter with Lecter is preferable to trading insults with the moribund Graham.

"It's a subtle thing. Easy to miss." Hannibal says in his usual clipped way, "But mine is sharp, it'll have you in stitches."

Mason clears his throat, glares at Lecter and reminds himself he has what he wants. He is curious about what Lecter planned on doing exactly, before the Paolini caught him playing around the basement.

"We'll see who has the last laugh. I'm going to hang you and Graham up on those hooks behind you, dangle you over my pigs, and watch you slice each other to ribbons trying to escape. What do you think about that?"

"I think you are counting your chickens before they hatch. Do you believe in Fate, Mason?

"No chickens here. I believe it's your fate to die." Mason thinks there was something he wanted to ask Lecter but he can't remember what it was.

"Is that why you chose Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* as the accompaniment?"

"I love…Beethoven. I identify with the maestro's creative genius. The Fifth is his greatest symphony, that's why I chose it. This…is a great moment."

"*So pocht das Schicksal an die Pforte*." Hannibal says his pronunciation flawless, of course.

"What's that…German? You're quoting the maestro?"

Hannibal nods, "*Thus Fate knocks at the door*. That's how Beethoven described the first movement."

Will lifts his head, the hum of the overhead lights buzzes loudly and the ceiling flickers with the dimming fluorescence and a resounding boom as the generator lurches. The serpent tailed creature scrapes along the cement, cocks its head at Will.

For thee too Fate waits before the Trojan wall. Even great and godlike, thou are doomed to fall.

Doomed to fall am I? And yet…you squirm here between my thighs, and hope the Fates indeed tell lies.

"Well then, I made an appropriate choice! Ha! I surprised myself!"

"Fate has a habit of not letting us choose our endings, Mason. Fate is knocking."

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he…with me." Mason says, quite smug with himself.

"I'm afraid you've opened the door to more than Christ. You are supping with me, now."

"I knew we would have some fun once you arrived. But, I think it's the pigs that'll be dining tonight." Mason rolls his tongue over his teeth and his eyes crease with thoughts of the imminent thrill.

"Yes. Fun times." Hannibal agrees.

Seeds successfully planted Hannibal has only to wait to water them…in a little while. He'll allow the vodka soaked soil in Mason's thick skull to dry out. He cocks his head to peer over the railing into the pit and then trains his attentions on the swarthy sullen Pazzi. Pazzi manages to maintain his suave demeanor despite the nervous tic that has suddenly afflicted his left eye. Fate has its habits to be sure, the Sisters are fickle but History is a beast, long in the tooth with a habit of gobbling up its own tail.

"*Capitano Pazzi.* At last we meet. A descendent of the infamous Pazzi of Florentine legend no doubt."

Lecter's observation sends an ice pick to his chest and Pazzi feels fear grip his balls. He wouldn't be surprised to find Lecter had worked up his family pedigree and memorized it. He is dealing with an educated madman, a former surgeon holding multiple degrees and Pazzi does not want to know the form Lecter's ideas of *contrapasso* would take should he ever get his hands on him.

Pazzi blows smoke at the tall muscular murderer who stands a few feet away seemingly unflustered by the rifle stuck in his ribs but Pazzi declines to answer. He stares into the face of this cannibal he has helped hunt down, the vile being responsible for the horrible death tableaux he has been tasked to investigate, the man who murdered Angelo Ruggerio with his bare hands, at least staked his naked body to a tree. He thinks he stares into a mask of pure evil. The handsome face exudes a malicious charm and Pazzi feels his blood chilling in his veins.

This is not the troubled angst ridden visage Graham presents. This is cruelty concealed beneath the veneer of civility, a wolf hiding among the sheep. The impulse to grab the envelope he has surely earned bubbles unbearably hot beneath his damp collar. He sucks on his cigarette instead, willing muscles primed for flight to relax.

"I was just about to serve up a bit of Mr. Graham, but he doesn't have an appetite for redemption. How about you? Though you've already sampled the menu, haven't you?"

Hannibal cocks a brow, "No need to be coy, Mason. I do indeed like my meat rare."

"Very…rare." Mason says as eyes flick to Will.

Teeth are already busy kneading the plump bottom lip when Hannibal turns his head toward the dolly to assess Will's reaction. Will casts a long-suffering sidelong glance in his direction, but otherwise stares straight ahead. There is an awkward few seconds of silence before Beethoven's Fifth starts up, yet again. Hannibal thinks the choice of music perfect for the occasion. He is shaken from his thoughts by Mason's whiny voice that intrudes like an insect.

"…and I am following the light, Doctor Lecter." Mason is saying, still so full of himself, "I have opened the door to Christ, been reborn, saved, and found pasture within."

"And you would be the shepherd in your pasture?" Hannibal prods.

"Whoever believes has eternal life; whoever doesn't…the wrath of God remains on him. I…am the instrument of that wrath."

"Talk…is cheap." Will's voice cuts through the violins. "The wolf is here to scatter the sheep."

"Last Rites? Serving up sacrament, Mason?" Hannibal says glancing at the other wolf in the room.

“Body and blood courtesy Mr. Graham. Take, eat…”

“Did you come here to be saved, Will?” Hannibal says, cutting Mason off mid-sentence, already bored with the nattering teeth and tired verbosity.

Preferring a much more pleasant sight, Hannibal stares into the pools of blue all patience. This…is the reason they are all gathered here in Mason’s mad pasture, this…is the culmination of the long awaited becoming. Patroclus has only to utter the words Achilles wants to hear. He watches a dimple carve itself into Will’s bristled cheek and the lop-sided grin he has ached to see again grows as words fall from soft lips to pluck strings pulled painfully taut across Hannibal’s heart.

“Did I?” Will says deliberately ambiguous.

“God moves in mysterious ways.” Hannibal responds tartly as Will plucks, hammers fall, and he feels the dissonant chords striking his chest.

“God is beyond measure in wanton malice and matchless in his irony.” Will mimics perfectly.

The mocking tone is meant to prick and it does. Adam throws stones into the garden from his crumbling wall, still blaming the creator and not the clay for his exile. Hannibal reminds himself that part of Patroclus’ armor is his shield of sarcasm. A shield he wields to wound or to avoid, a shield he wields now out of fear. *Patience…*

Tired of watching Lecter and Graham make eyes at each other, Mason clears his throat.

“Blood and irony. You two watched me eat my own nose.” Mason says eyes rolling to Pazzi, “Oh yes. You didn’t know that, did you, *Capo*? Cut off my own nose to spite my ruined face. Then wrapped me up in plastic like a package of meat. But I wasn’t good enough for the table, was I?”

“Still aren’t.” Hannibal says clasping his hands behind his back.

The rifle remains, but that stupid Italian shouldn’t be letting Lecter put his hands down. Mason’s mouth twitches as ligaments flush deep red.

“I’ll let you choose which bit of Graham you’d like to swallow.”

“Was that a little joke, Mason?” Hannibal says as Will rolls his head to stare at the far wall.

“Choose, or I will.” Mason pants excitedly, eyes on the scalpel in Cordell’s fist. “Nose or…”

“I heard.” Hannibal says.

Since Vincenzo continues to play with his phone, and a phone call from Elario in the next couple minutes seems remote, Hannibal thinks Will has a better chance of protecting himself if Hannibal does not choose his nose. Will has likely already considered his choices and is expecting Hannibal to take the low road as it were.

“Well?” Mason inquires edgily.

“I think I’ll eschew the nose. I rather like Will’s profile. I’ve developed a taste for the more exotic cuts.”

Will's head abruptly rolls back from the wall he has been scrutinizing with marked intensity and Hannibal finds himself staring into two stone cold blue eyes and ruddy lips pressed too thin for words. Hannibal would be convinced of Will's indignation if he didn't know better. What's important is that Mason and Cordell are convinced. Mason is indeed bitter and Hannibal suspects Will's inner demon is up to the task.

"You heard him, Cordell. Careful now…just the tip. And don't forget the rubber band to tie him off. The blood is for the pigs."

"Tell me, Mason…will you feel a tingle below watching Cordell carve that tender flesh?" Hannibal intones quietly, conspiratorially as though Mason's sick voyeurism is a pleasure they share.

The question draws a tug of flesh from the lipless maw as Mason's eyes shift around, unable to decide where exactly he wants to focus – Lecter or Graham. Movement and a grunt from the dolly cause the cruel blue eyes to turn from Hannibal and to widen with gleeful anticipation.

The scalpel gleams again before his eyes and Will feels Cordell's other hand upon his trousers, then zipper. In his mind he sees what he has to do and he waits for Cordell to bend down, for his hand to reach inside his open fly. His entire being seems to flinch at the invasive fingers, muscles tense against rope at the unfolding of fabric and the clumsy fondling of forbidden flesh.

An excruciating scream pierces the symphony still raging from the speakers overhead, but it is not Will who shrieks in agony. Hannibal leans forward for a better view. A spray of blood obscures the glorious vision of Will ripping off a mouthful of Cordell's ear, his hands gripping Cordell's collar to hold him fast as he spits out a chunk of flesh to bite into the hand holding the scalpel before Cordell can plunge it into his jugular.

"Atta boy." Hannibal beams as the scalpel clatters to the floor.

"Cordell!" Mason squawks, "Don't hurt him…not yet!"

"*Son cavoli Amari*! Did you see that? What the fuck?" Tano says to his brother.

"*Ai…Mannaggia. Egli è veramente incazzato ora."* Rosso agrees, fingers plucking thoughtfully at the fuzz over his lip.

In his hurry to clear out of the way of the splattering blood Cordell slides upon, Pazzi steps backward nearly toppling one of the Casaletto brothers. Rosso and Tano move out of his way to stare open mouthed at the gory scene playing out before their eyes, the somber trumpets of the Fifth blaring in their ears as blood spurts then oozes from the side of Cordell's head.

Looking up from examining the generous hunk of ear lobe sticking to cement, Hannibal finds himself mesmerized by the sight of Will's face painted red looking every bit the predator he is, the blood so thick it clings to his teeth as he stares slack jawed teeth bared at Cordell, pale blue eyes ablaze alive with the scent and taste of blood and breath. Though Cordell is nearly twice Will's size, Hannibal has no doubt that once released from his bonds Will will make a mess of him.

Cordell wretches himself from Will's grasp, retrieves the dropped scalpel, and cradles his right ear as he stumbles backward heeding his master's voice though every nerve screeches and every muscle in his body cries out to throttle the maddening blue-eyed creature glaring at him from across the cement.

Will's heart thumps steadily in his chest as the exhilaration and near euphoria recede from his brain and limbs. He enjoyed sinking his teeth into Cordell, reveled in the sound of cartilage ripping from his skull and relished the metallic taste tingling upon his tongue. Senses saturated and instinct served, Will wipes his blood drenched chin across his shoulder, lifting his eyes to Hannibal as he does. Undisguised delight spreads across Hannibal's face, the pride in his creation as plain as…well the nose on his face.

The familiar self-loathing rises like bile and Will shoves it back down, clinging to the last few ecstatic moments like a drowning man thrashing at waves. He hates that wants this. He hates that he loves…

"You should have tied his hands!" Mason yelps his voice high pitched almost hysterical. "I will yet rejoice in the extinction of my enemy!"

Cordell stares dully at Mason for a moment, then cracks his neck and reaches for a terry towel. Mason is understandably upset. Cordell has a high tolerance for pain now that the shock has passed. He presses the towel tightly against the side of his head to staunch the flow of blood.

Ears bleed more than one might think. Especially when the cartilage is separated from the blood filled layer of connective tissue around it. Cordell's skull thrums painfully with the music and the pulsing of tender membranes surrounding the injury. He looks at his hand and grimaces at the bloody broken skin already purple. He thinks when he gets hold of Graham again he will perform more than a sloppy circumcision.

"I think you've upset Mason." Hannibal says.

"Good." Will says spitting out another mouthful of blood and saliva, this time at Pazzi's feet.

Pazzi steps away and crushes the cigarette that fell out of his mouth as he had watched Graham bite off Cordell's ear, well most of it. He glances at the envelope and decides Cordell is too close to make a grab for it just yet. But the impulse to get away from these…people knots in his gut like an ulcer and Pazzi is not sure how much longer he can stand it.

His phone vibrates in his pocket and Pazzi yanks it out of his liner, glances at the caller id. *Crawford. Again. Merda!* Pazzi slips the phone back in his pocket. *Fuck Crawford.*

"Mis…ter…Gray…am." Mason says, "I'm afraid we'll have to string you up a little earlier than planned for your unforgivably bad behavior. Vincenzo, perhaps you could tear yourself away from your phone for few minutes? What…am I paying you for?"

Vincenzo glances up from the illuminated screen of his enormous phone and looks plaintively at Hannibal. He blinks his eyes once and shrugs. The creases around Hannibal's mouth deepen with satisfaction. Vincenzo looks to Mason and the pupils shrink with contempt. Hannibal thinks this a fortuitous omen considering Elario's call has finally come, and if he is reading Vincenzo correctly, Hannibal may signal for it whenever he is ready.

"Vincenzo!" Mason screeches again.

"Mason." Hannibal says adopting the commanding paternal tone he knows Mason cannot help but obey. "Look at me."

Mason’s eyes flit back and forth between Lecter and Vincenzo. He glances at the miserable Graham’s upturned and attentive albeit blood smeared face and dismisses him, focusing instead on Lecter. He wonders what the pompous doctor is on about now. And why is Vincenzo still standing there?

“Vincenzo…” Mason says teeth grinding like mad.

“In a minute, *Signore* Verger…this is kinda interesting.”

“I’m not paying you to be interested. Listen why you work…*Capisce*? Get Mr. Graham up on that hook before he bites someone else. And upside down like we talked about.”

“Mason…” Hannibal coos.

“What?” The word is punctuated with annoyance.

Will senses a little fear as well. What Mason thinks is happening is not happening. The glances between Hannibal and Vincenzo have not gone unnoticed. As Will sneaks a glance at Pazzi, he is certain the glances have not escaped the Polizia captain either.

“Mason...” Hannibal says taking a step away from the Paolini holding the rifle. “Fate is knocking. Do you hear it?”

Will’s spine prickles at Hannibal’s foray back to Fate. His mind tumbles with conversations with Hannibal, past and recent, in his head or actual. What is Hannibal up to?

“I hear you trying to distract me.” Mason glares at Vincenzo’s relative whose name he forgot immediately after introductions and opens his mouth to protest the lapse of security but Lecter is talking again…

“The use of C minor sets the dark Fate motif for the rest of the symphony. Every subsequent movement, variations on those four notes. But you wouldn’t know that because you only listen to the first.”

“So what? It’s the famous part. I like the first movement the best.”

“Because you like the comfort you find in the familiarity. Do you have trouble with transitions, Mason?”

Out of the corner of his eye Hannibal sees Will raise a brow. In fact, Hannibal commands the attention of everyone in the room. Even Cordell is all ears, more or less. Hannibal finds it ironically amusing everyone feels safer with a gun raised and cocked. Music appreciation is sorely underrated and the opportunity to provide a dual lesson is such a rare thing, edifying for the cub, ultimately devastating for poor Mason.

“Not…that I’m aware of.” The tone is defensive, churlish.

“Listening to the same movement over and over deprives you of hearing the symphony as Beethoven intended. You wouldn’t look at just one frame of Michelangelo’s ceiling in Sistine Chapel, would you?”

Images of Hannibal’s version of *The Creation of Adam* come in a flash and Will stifles a grin as Mason’s brows knit into a tight pucker. Will wagers that Mason has never seen the Sistine Chapel except in a magazine…by accident. Predictably, Mason fronts for Hannibal.

“I suppose Beethoven is the musical equivalent of the Renaissance master and I have…listened to the entire symphony before.” Mason drawls all sophistication suddenly, “What…is your point? If there is one.”

“Oh, there is. May I?” Hannibal gestures to the portable sound system and the music device hooked up to it.

“May you…what? Has everyone lost their mind? Stay right where you are. Not a step closer. Vincenzo?” Mason’s voice climbs another octave.

“*Si, Signore* Verger, I’ll get the music.”

“Forget the music…I told you to get Graham.”

Will thinks Mason’s eyebrows can’t creep any higher as they disappear beneath the fringe of slick blonde bangs. Hannibal is winding up Mason and Vincenzo is letting him, assisting him. The seeds of Hannibal’s design begin to bloom in Will’s head, images of sunflowers and roses swaying with the morning breeze, red and white sails drifting on a shimmering still sea on the backs of corpses floating face up. He sees the Paolini, Pazzi, Du Maurier, Jack…he sees them all. All but Daniel.

Does Achilles trust Patroclus?

Does Patroclus trust Achilles?

“Will isn’t going anywhere.” Hannibal says taking another step toward the coffee table and the sound system. “It will be easier to understand if you can hear the music while I explain. It’s the fourth movement you want to be playing if triumphant is what you are going for.”

Will watches Mason’s eyes nearly pop out of his head as the lizard mouth opens and closes in a helpless gesture beneath the drape of glossy black wings. Cordell stands immobile at the end of the coffee table still clutching a fresh towel to what is left of his ear, a pile of blood drenched terrycloth at his feet. Will thinks he spots a spindly tail twitching from beneath the cuff of his trousers. Will is certain the raised nubs of bone protruding from the crown of Cordell’s scalp weren’t there before.

“I am triumphant and I’m intrigued, Doctor Lecter. Go ahead, but no funny business.” Mason rolls his eyes at Vincenzo’s cousin and the older Italian nods at Mason. Mason feels a lot better after the nod.

“No funny business, I promise.”

“Watch him, Cordell.” Mason manages to choke out.

Cordell winces but nods at his benevolent employer not taking his eyes off Hannibal. Mr. Verger is the only employer who has ever permitted Cordell the lavish latitude with which to perform his duties and…indulge his hobbies. He is the only person Cordell has ever met who appreciates his unique approach to caretaking.

Hannibal pats the controls and smiles congenially at Cordell, a disarmingly pleasant smile if there ever was one. Will marvels at Hannibal’s innate ability to seemingly take control under any circumstance. Of course he's in control, isn't he always? Rewriting the *Iliad* and pissing all over Mason's symphony, replacing it with his own.

That melody you hear… an unfinished symphony, the ink still wet.

"Fate knocks in the first movement. You opened the door to Fate, didn't you, Mason."

"You seem to think I did."

"The notes of Fate are relentless in the first movement, symbolic of Fate's dark power. Beethoven weaves the motif into two themes in the second movement…are you listening, Mason?"

"Yes…I'm listening. Very pretty."

"It is, isn't it? Did you notice the transition?"

"No…I missed it."

"You missed it. Tsk, Tsk. Suddenly you are in the second movement, the rhythm is the same but the notes and harmonies are all different and you don't know how you got there. I'll play it again… See? Good… Now, fast forward to the third movement…I know you are eager to resume your party."

Mason rolls his eyes, but unbelievably allows Hannibal to continue. Hubris, Will thinks. Mason believes he is untouchable, lulled into complacency by the poison he has tasted before, despite Hannibal standing mere feet from him. Will licks at his lips and spits again extending his range so that Pazzi has to move further away glaring at Will as he does.

"Now, here's the transition from the second movement to the third." Hannibal says adjusting the volume to a more reasonable level.

"There's a pause with the shift in key." Mason warms with enthusiasm pleased with himself that he paid attention.

"Very good, Mason. And a shift in tempo." Hannibal says all encouragement.

The third movement begins, and Will recognizes the moody scherzo of subdued cellos and violins until the horn section blares its own four note variation. Mason's eyes dart around as he too listens to the musical acrobatics of woodwinds, violins, and horns. Will notes everyone in the room is riveted to the music, even Pazzi and the Casaletto brothers stand motionless, ears pricking with the marching cadence of the third movement. Everyone but Cordell.

The meaty lips quiver as Cordell presses the towel to his ear. He hasn't dropped the towel he holds tightly against his head and it seems to Will the blood has slowed enough so that soon, Cordell will be able to walk across the floor to retrieve the rest of his ear that lies at Will's feet. Will finds it curious he hasn't done so already, but then again, Mason's doctors do not inspire confidence in the medical arts.

"Beethoven is still weaving his four notes, do you hear them?" Hannibal asks with soothing patience.

"I do." Mason says.

“Here comes the fourth movement, considered the greatest transition in all of classical music. There is no pause at all…it simply *becomes* the fourth movement. The transformation complete.”

Will knows Hannibal is no longer talking to Mason. The sounds of the sea seem to fill the room as water washes over Will’s feet. Achilles stands before him now, majestic in his armor, looking out over the ocean at the triremes dancing on the waves. He turns his head slowly, offering his profile, waiting for Patroclus to answer. The lights dim again and the waves recede…

“Beethoven struggled with the imminent fate of deafness.” Will says as Mason’s eyes shift at the sound of his voice, “Each movement entwines the themes of hope and despair until the fourth movement…”

“I thought…I said to string him up…” The irritating voice begins to chirp and the red and while sails of the fleet catch the wind and the triremes begin to move in unison across the water…

Hannibal talks right over Mason, looks over his shoulder at Will. “Yes, the fourth, when the motif of Fate has been utterly destroyed, deconstructed. Ultimately…defeating Fate.”

“Or…” Will says drawing a breath he knows Hannibal will hang onto as the fourth movement bursts on the heels of the last note of the third in glorious splendor.

Hannibal turns slowly from the sound system toward the dolly, chin high, regal, Will thinks as his entire being is swept up by the dark luminous eyes that eclipse everything else. Will meets those eyes dead on.

“Or accepting Fate.” Will says with a quiet finality that surprises him.

Mere seconds tic before the violins register once again, but for Hannibal there had been time enough to share a delicious moment with Will, a shadow of firelight and whiskey in the salon, a note of hope plucked from the symphony they would write together. The one they are writing now.

Hannibal turns to Mason. Time to finish the lesson. Mason looks up at Hannibal, a perplexing pucker between his brows. He knows something is not quite right, but he can’t seem to navigate through the last few minutes with any sense of coherence. Lips smack together, suddenly dry and Mason rolls his eyes from left to right looking for Cordell. He remembers Cordell is bleeding and resigns himself to waiting a little longer for his drink…

“Mason….” Hannibal begins, waits for Mason’s frazzled mind to catch up, “Transitions are all about timing. Fate beckons and we must answer.”

“What…what’s that? What Fate are you talking about, Doctor Lecter? Thank you for the music theory, but my pigs are getting restless and…Vincenzo! Why is Mr. Graham still tied to the dolly?”

“Mason…did you miss the transition?

Hannibal’s voice is as smooth and sweet as the Viennese chocolates left unwrapped on the table. He looks to Will. Will shakes his head, the sardonic smirk most endearing and the dissonance dissolves in the singular note struck by that most expressive mouth. Hannibal thinks the old slaughter house may yet find a special place in his memory palace.

Mason concentrates, eyes fixated on the ceiling as he listens, determined not to miss the greatest musical transition of all time.

Pazzi cracks his knuckles, impatient and tense with his back braced by the windows that line the wall the length of the second level. Rosso and Tano also lean against the frosted panes of glass, jacket pockets swollen with Pazzi suspects more Viennese chocolates. He did not catch the transition between the musical movements, but he is certain they are listening to the fourth and final movement of the symphony. He is also certain that the game has changed and as the music marches on, Pazzi is determined not to be around when the final note of this final movement plays.

With a wag of his finger, Pazzi summons the hired help and the Casaletto boys press a little closer sensing a shift in the climate. The boys nod as Pazzi whispers his instructions.

"*Capitano Pazzi*," Vincenzo nods to his cousin bearing the rifle, "*Cosmo non ama Poliziatti*."

"*Caspisco."* Pazzi holds his hands in front of him, as do the Casaletto brothers.

"Now if you please, Vincenzo." Hannibal says eyes drifting from Mason to Cordell to Pazzi and the blossoming sociopaths at his side who will never bloom. He looks finally into the grizzled face of Vincenzo that has appeared at his side.

"Is up to Elario, *capisce*?" Vincenzo says.

"*Capisco.*" Hannibal returns.

"*Signore* Verger…*Il Padrino, Elario Paolini* is on the phone…" Vincenzo calls out to Mason.

"Oh? Papa used to talk with *il Padrone* all the time, but I've never had the pleasure…"

"He wants to talk to *Signore* Graham." Vincenzo says.

"What?" Mason's face sags like wet putty.

Vincenzo walks past the stunned Mason and the moose-faced Cordell under the watchful gaze of his rifle toting cousin, passes by the confused Pazzi and Casaletto trash to stand before a confounded Will. Neither Graham nor Lecter are what he expected. Over the past hour, he has observed and listened carefully to their colorful exchanges with Mason and each other. Though he wears no badge and did not attend an Ivy League school, he recognizes embedded communication when he hears it and as his mind replays selected conversations his appreciation for the intelligence and tenacity of Lecter and Graham grows.

A man should conduct himself with honor no matter his station. Mr. Verger has not been truthful about what happened on his farm which casts doubt on everything he has said since. Whatever else Graham is, he seems honorable. The wiry American may appear dainty, but he took his punishment like a man and Vincenzo can respect that. And surprisingly, Lecter has his own honor. He has abided by the terms of the agreement thus far.

Tobacco stained fingers turn Will's face from side to side, careful to avoid the sticky spatter. Vincenzo reaches into his jacket liner and pulls out a pristine pressed handkerchief Will notes is delicately embroidered. He shakes it once and Will wonders why this man who surely wants him dead is offering to clean his face with something so dear.

Choking back a coughing fit, Mason barks a little more loudly, "He wants to?…what in the name of GOD…is going on here!" Mason swallows and takes a deep a breath as he can manage aware his blood pressure has skyrocketed.

“Transitions, Mason. You should pay attention.” Hannibal says absently.

“I…can hardly breathe…”

“Hold your breath then.”

Hannibal turns from the gasping Mason. A bemused smile spreads across his face as he watches Will’s neck and face blush pink from Vincenzo’s cursory attentions, the touching no doubt eliciting a cascade of associations. Predator one minute; lamb the next. So paradoxical…his Will.

Will patiently allows Vincenzo to clean him up, aware they are being stared at and averting his eyes as Vincenzo drags the soft linen over the contours of his face. As he gently swipes at Will’s nose and lips, memory flashes of other hands, another cloth sliding over his wet skin, a dunk in a porcelain tub... Will looks up wincing at the awkwardness he feels as Vincenzo stuffs the soiled linen into his jeans.

“A gift…from my mother.” He shrugs, the large brown eyes narrow a little as he gazes into Will’s bewildered face. “I’ll wash it later.”

Back to business, Vincenzo deftly pulls the phone from his jacket and holds it out to Will. “I’ll put it on the speaker, eh?...*Padrone*….I have *Signor* Graham here. I don’t think his Italian is so good… *Bene*…He says he’ll speak English for you.”

“Thank you.” Will says, no less confused.

“Signore Graham?” A throaty voice saturated with years of homemade wine and cigarettes comes on speaker.

“*Signore* Paolini.”

“I have a few questions for you. I have a decision to make. While we talk…I want you to look at Vincenzo and only Vincenzo. *Capisce*?

“Yes.”

Why does Elario want to talk to Mr. Graham? Says Mason.

“Did you kill the Polizia detective?”

“No”

Might want to be quiet, Mason if you know what’s good for you. Says Hannibal.

“You and Doctor Lecter killed Bernardo and Filippo in the alley. Do you regret doing that?”

“I regret that I was forced to defend myself.”

“Can’t blame you for that. But you ripped him open brutally. You are a violent man.”

“I can be.”

“You sent the twins, Lucia and Luciano off to investigate Doctor Lecter?”

"I did."

Why are the Paolini pointing a gun at me and Cordell?

"Did you kill Luciano?"

"Yes."

Ask them yourself.

"Explain to me how that come about."

"Luciano came to my…house to kill me. Doctor Lecter sent him, promised him if he killed me, he would release Lucia. Luciano…had no choice. I had no choice."

"You live alone?"

Captain Pazzi, please put your hands out where Signor Paolini can see them.

"No."

"So you were protecting *famiglia*?"

"Close enough. Yes."

"Did you kill, or help kill Matteo and Carlo?"

Will pauses, looks into Vincenzo's eyes. "No." Vincenzo's expression does not change; he continues to hold the phone, unmoved and silent.

"How did you meet Mason?"

"I…learned about him from his sister. I met him at his estate."

"You were both patients of Doctor Lecter?"

"Yes. As was Mason."

"Why did you go there?"

"He had been…unkind to his sister."

"What did you do?"

"I punched him. He threatened to feed me to his pigs. I drew a gun on him."

"Did you tell him to kill Doctor Lecter?"

He told me you were the one I should feed to my pigs…

"More or less."

I know, Mason. Now, Shhhh.

“And Mason tried to kill him.”

“It would be more accurate to say that Mason sent Matteo and Carlo to get him and kill him.”

“At the farm?”

“Yes.”

“You and the sister, Margot…Did you make a baby with Margot?”

Another pause, “Yes.”

“And Mason found out. What happened?”

“Mason…took it from her. Mutilated her. Marked her.”

“That’s why you went out to the estate. You thought about killing him?”

“I thought about it. I was angry. Angry at Mason for doing it. And…angry at Doctor Lecter for putting the idea in Mason’s head.”

“You helped Doctor Lecter escape. Why did you do that?”

“Because Mason intended to kill us both. Because I was more angry with Mason than I was with Doctor Lecter.

“When you made the baby with Margot, did you fuck her or did you make love to her?”

“I…why would you…

“Between us, one man to another…Did you romance her?”

“That night…we were partners seeking refuge from phantoms in the darkness. It was…just one night.”

Bull…Shit!

Tsk Tsk. Poetry.

“One more question. Is Doctor Lecter *famiglia?"*

“Is he…?” Will’s mind grinds to a halt, freezes up so completely that he is momentarily tongue-tied. Wet leaves float before his eyes and the scent of moist soil and earthworms fills his nose.

Trust is not a rose that blooms easily in our garden, is it?

He is lying on the ground, naked, unable to move…Boboli…Hannibal leans over him, he touches a finger to Will’s wet cheek and lifts a single tear from his face to his own lips.

Will…

Will’s heart cinches in his chest as he remembers…

Throughout all eternity, I forgive you, you forgive me.

"*Si, è la famiglia."* Will says, still staring into Vincenzo's penetrating brown eyes.

"Thank you, *Signore* Graham. That will be all. Vincenzo?"

Vincenzo steps back with the phone to his ear. He holds up a finger while he speaks. Will's thoughts spin as he tries to imagine all the angles at play. He imagines no one in the room save the Paolini and Hannibal understands what just happened. He takes a deep breath to clear his head while his fingers knead at his damp trousers. He needs to feel something tangible to ground him once again before his inferno rages into the room or Cordell tries to cut him again.

Will forces himself to look around. All eyes are trained on Vincenzo, even Pastor Mason's pulpit is silent.

"Yes, *Padrino…"* Vincenzo nods at the phone, a force of habit.

*"*What do you think after our conversation?"

"What do I think? I think *Signor* Graham truthful. I watched him the entire time. I think maybe my brother and Matteo make bad decisions. I see *famiglia* protecting their own and I think the Paolini have been dishonored by *Signore* Verger, not *Signore* Lecter…or *Signore* Graham. *Signore* Verger involed our family in something that should have stayed between him and Doctor Lecter."

"You saw what they did with the bodies of our *famiglia*. Should we forgive them, Vincenzo?"

Vincenzo lifts his head from his shoulders and straightens up to stand erect as he gazes about the room. His tired eyes sweep over Verger, Lecter, and Graham. All three of them bear responsibility for Matteo and Carlo's deaths, but it is Verger who could have prevented those deaths. Verger's sister received more kindness from Graham than her own brother. Verger is not worthy of his *famiglia* or his name. If the Paolini are to continue dealing with the Vergers and to keep their secrets, Vincenzo thinks the sister more deserving.

As for their dead, they had their Mass, their spirits put to rest. There has been enough Paolini blood spilled and Vincenzo's heart does not cry for revenge. It cries for peace.

"I have the forgiveness in my heart, *Padrone*."

"*Il Padrone* gives his blessing. *Arrivederci, che Dio vi benedica.*"

As Vincenzo casts a weary glance at him, Hannibal realizes Elario put Will on the phone for reasons other than simply corroborating stories. According to Roberta, Vincenzo is Elario's only godson and Elario is without any biological sons to survive him. Elario is grooming his godson.

Vincenzo clicks off his phone, looks at it for a moment and then slips it into his jacket. Slowly, he walks over to Hannibal. He signals to his cousins, Cosimo whose rifle is trained on Pazzi, and Marcello, who has joined them. Both cousins take up positions on either end of the ramp, effectively barring egress.

"*Dottore."* Vincenzo waves his hand through the air. "We seem to have our agreement."

"What agreement?" Mason's voice is so tight he squeaks.

"*Essere un coglione*!" Pazzi cries, "The Paoilini have turned on you! You stupid, crazy…*figlio di puttana*!"

"*Stai zitto*." Cosimo points the rifle at Pazzi. The expletives stop immediately. "*E tu, Cordell*."

Cordell has tossed his bloody towel to the floor and he stands with fists helplessly clenched aside the coffee table. He bares his teeth in a sickly smile at Cosmo and waits.

"You are certain this is what you want." Vincenzo says.

"Yes….and…"

"Wants? Wants? Vincenzo…Cordell?"

"And, thank you, Vincenzo." Hannibal says, exhaling slowly in an effort to dispel the impulse to crush Mason's trachea from where he stands. *Patience…*

"What for?" Vincenzo says.

"I didn't realize until the end of the phone call that *il Padrone* wasn't basing his decision on Will; he was basing it on you."

"*La famiglia."* Vincenzo nods.

"Si, la famiglia."

"Would somebody…please explain what the FUCK is going on?" Mason yelps.

"A moment please, Vincenzo." Hannibal says turning to the sputtering and outraged Mason, "You missed the transition Mason. You began with the first movement. That has passed. We are now in the fourth movement. Triumph, remember?"

Mason's mouth hangs open so he can gulp down oxygen. His mind is locked up. Fate knocked on his door and Mason opened it. The open door has slammed shut and Mason will be damned if he can get it open again… This can't be real.

What Mason is experiencing isn't restricted to reality, so reality has to be forced to adapt.

"I'll continue anyway." Hannibal says, "Listen carefully, Mason. Are you listening? Blink your eyes if you understand. Good. The Fifth is keyed in C minor; the minor key is what lends it that ominous tone you like. Beethoven sustains a minor key until the fourth movement when he shifts it to C major. That may not seem significant, but the shift was not common practice. A symphony begun in a minor key remained in a minor key. But Beethoven wasn't common. Do you know why he did that?

"Something to do with…Fate?"

Mason grinds his teeth, rolls his eyes. He looks to Hannibal like a Ventriloquist's doll.

"You're getting warmer. The music of the fourth movement is intended to express the defeat…or acceptance…of fate. Beethoven wrote about his choice of key changes, he said, *Joy follows sorrow, sunshine – rain*."

"So…the first, second, and third movements are rain and the fourth is sunshine?"

"Yes, Mason. And the forecast for you…is rain."

Hannibal looks quickly to Will, locks onto the pale blue eyes. “*Bientôt nous plongerons dans les froides ténèbres; Adieu, vive clarté de nos étés trop courts!”*

“Beethoven spoke German, not French.” Mason quips, “And what does rain have to do with… Fate?”

Mason’s fragile mind hangs on the word as he sees visions of empty pews strewn about a worn wooden floor while Papa talks from atop his pulpit into the vacuum of the vacant church.

“And behold the veil of the temple was rent in twain…and the earth did quake…”

Will blinks a few times at the nonsense spewing from Mason’s maw. He has finally cracked. Instead, Will concentrates on the French verse and the rather grave tone in which Hannibal had spoken it. Rather than risk the chance that someone besides Will speaks French, Hannibal has quoted lines from a poem. He realizes Hannibal is quoting Baudelaire…

Pazzi’s French is no better than it was this morning, but he knows who does speak fluent French. Lecter is sending Graham a coded message and Pazzi has run out of time. He stands with the Casaletto brothers on either side of him, all three of them cognizant that to move their hands in any way will send a spray of bullets in their direction.

“*Signor* Verger, our business is concluded.” Vincenzo looks to Hannibal. “*Arrivederci.*”

Vincenzo moves to stand beside Cosimo on the landing of the ramp and takes the pistol his cousin proffers from his hand. Marcello inches backward slowly down the ramp on the other side, rifle cocked and ready. Vincenzo touches his finger to his forehead in farewell and the two of them also back down the ramp slowly.

Mason shrieks from his wheelchair. The jaws flap uncontrollably as the wild blue eyes widen in disbelief. Cordell reaches for the oxygen mask, fumbling over bags of chocolate and knocking over stemware that crashes to the floor. He grabs at the tray of surgical instruments for something, anything sharp…

“Listen Mason…” Hannibal says, “I hear Fate knocking. The wolves have come to scatter the sheep.”

Hannibal’s words are lost in the rush of images plaguing Will’s vision. He focuses on the blood splattered cement at his feet, repeats the French verses again. *Bientôt nous plongerons…Soon we shall plunge into the cold darkness; Farewell, vivid brightness of our short-lived summers!*

Even as the translation registers, Will realizes the Paolini are going to cut the lights on their way out. Hannibal negotiated terms and he must have specifically requested the Paolini leave the problem solving to him.

Mason is a problem. Problem solving is hunting. It's a savage pleasure, and we are born to it. A pleasure we can share.

Hannibal would share it with no one else.

Achilles wished all Greeks would die, so that he and Patroclus could conquer Troy alone. Took divine intervention to bring them down.

Hannibal would tempt the Fates Will invites.

This isn't sustainable. We're going to get caught.

Hannibal…would beg to differ.

Hannibal looks into the shredded visage mumbling scripture in preparation for his salvation. He takes care to note the advancing positions of Pazzi and the Casaletto brothers and Cordell's frantic plunder of Mason's surgical tray. Metal and bodies will move quickly now. First things first. He has to free Will from his bonds and his inferno...

Will feels the thing inside coiling restlessly as he imagines its slick underbelly slipping along the contour of his wound just beneath the skin. The walls glow with golden flames, vibrating with the pulse of the music blaring loudly triumphant as the ravens take flight above and the pounding of hooves thunders below…and then, everything goes black.

"Will…"

The scent of sandalwood, spiced leather and cigarettes fills his nostrils in the darkness, he hears the squeak of a metal blade ripping through rope and his arms are free. The grip of a knife is pressed into his hand as Will stares into the red-rimmed eyes of his infernal companion. Will knows he should not be able to see anything in the total darkness but he does, his reality has truly been breached by his nightmares. A brushing of feathers alights upon his cheek, warm breath hovers so close he could open his mouth and taste it. The creature speaks.

"Move fast. Cut your legs free. I'll not touch you again. If anyone else comes near…it's not me."

Hannibal's tone is curt yet imparts confidence to Will. A quick tug of Will's hair and then he is gone, the scent of him lingering in the air.

Knowing he is a target, Will frantically saws through the rope between his knees, he shudders feeling the great wings spread over him in a protective shroud as another creature comes hurtling out of the mouth of Hell. The marvelous sounds of mayhem and madness mingle with the deaf maestro's masterpiece all around Will as he leaps from the dolly into darkness, knife clenched comfortably in his hand.

The fragrance of the roses outside the window floats past his nose the way Bella's Moroccan perfume used to float upon the evening breeze as Jack Crawford stands in the dining room of a very messy villa on the outskirts of Impruneta. The floral scent does little to dispel the smell of spoiled food on the expansive and decorous table. Hands jammed in the pockets of his brushed cotton trousers he surveys the damage and the damning evidence.

Goddamit, Will….

He has turned on every light in Hannibal's home and wishes he had not.

Every single room is saturated with evidence that supports Du Maurier's assertions about Hannibal and Will and with each assertion Jack can think of a convincing rebuttal from Will. Forensics is going to have field day between the kitchen and the dining room. A struggle definitely occurred here. The antique curio cabinet is empty, its contents shattered and strewn about the carpet, cracked panes of glass in the doors hanging in pieces.

Du Maurier had said she joined them for dessert. There are three place settings at the table.

Did you run into her while you were with Hannibal?

Jack, I barely remember running into Hannibal.

You don't remember anything while you were drugged?

I remember my hallucinations, but I didn't hallucinate about her. Everything I remember was drug induced, Jack. I was basically tripping…

He studies the assortment of soiled wine glasses and several opened bottles of extravagantly expensive wine. Masseto Toscana just like Du Maurier had said. Is Will dubiously duplicit? Or masterfully Machiavellian?

Will may not have hallucinated about her, but he plainly sat here with her and Hannibal. There are plenty of leftovers and Jack can only imagine what forensics will find on the plates and in the fridge besides fingerprints. Thoughts of his numerous dinners with Hannibal cause a curdling in his stomach, a corrosive spurt of acid to his throat, as he gazes at the morbid mounds of the remains of their repast putrefying in the humid Tuscan air. The windows have been left open and the villa is full of flies. He thinks perhaps the centrepiece is the most revealing bit of evidence in the entire room.

The hyacinths have long since wilted but the scenes on the Greek krater speak to Jack. More tales from the *Iliad.* Jack acknowledges that he does not understand the specific references embedded here but Hannibal's obsession with the pair of tragic Greek heroes signals to Jack an unrequited yearning for a friendship that only Will provides. Will is unique in his capacity to understand and even accept Hannibal for who and what he is. Will is irresistible to Hannibal for that reason alone and Jack thinks he has seen sufficient evidence of the other reasons.

Du Maurier had clearly not been invited to this private affair.

Intimacy between Will and Hannibal exists on many levels. Their physical relationship represents a fraction of the kind of invasive mental games the two of them are capable of. Hannibal may have insinuated himself into Will's' psyche, but Will has imprinted on Hannibal. Jack wonders if either of them anticipated being so deeply affected by the other. Jack can only imagine what theories will fly when forensics processes the master bedroom, clearly Hannibal's, and the adjoining bathroom. Jack knows Will's hair color and the strands of brunette curls in the royal sized tub and the pillow cases are likely his.

The psychological and emotional intimacy they share is beyond anything Jack has ever encountered.

Shades of intimacy color the living room; the actual and the implied, side by side. The piano is… jaw-dropping beautiful and…full of greasy fingerprint smudges along its varnished wood. Who else's but Hannibal's and likely, Will's. Perhaps, Du Maurier.

The charcoal drawings are as revealing as they are voluminous, the majority of them of Will. More drawings for the Behavioral Science Unit's vault of art from Hannibal. Jack can think of one especially obnoxious psychiatrist who will be demanding access to them for his book. There is enough in this house alone for a sequel, perhaps several. Hannibal's infamy has already inspired a plethora of published papers on budding psychopaths and cannibal pathology.

Jack understands Will had nothing to do with the drawings beyond providing Hannibal inspiration but they do speak to Hannibal's state of mind and to a degree they speak to Will's as well.

As he had gazed at drawing after drawing Jack had found himself moved by the depth of attachment and had felt like an emotional voyeur intruding on the naked displays of intimacy, some displays had been quite naked. Sheet after sheet of thick art paper imbued with images culled from Hannibal's inner universe had been rendered exquisitely by his talented hand, delicate beautiful things from a man Jack knows capable of savage cruelty.

Jack can almost feel the aching loneliness he sees displayed in every drawing. Jack reads a profound and insatiable longing for what he left behind, for what he would have back. And with whom. He tries to imagine what Will had thought and felt as he had stood here looking at all of this because surely he had. Hannibal had left them in plain view.

Jack thinks Hannibal had left them out for Will and only Will. Du Maurier's visit had been a surprise though Jack cannot imagine Du Maurier unaware of Hannibal's pathological obsession. She must have interrupted a dinner Will would have kept secret. The thought rankles in his gut like a fistful of nails.

Hannibal had abandoned his villa in a hurry, too; unwillingly and with regret. He had to set up his tableau at Boboli. He must have another residence or, he has availed himself of Du Maurier's residence where ever that may be. And he must have anticipated Du Maurier would inform Jack at some point. Either Will really does not remember being here, or he had no intention of revealing Hannibal's address to Jack, ever.

What is Hannibal up to? Is he playing Will and Du Maurier against each other? To the victor go the spoils? And how does Mason figure into all this? And the Paolini?

Jack is still not certain if Du Maurier and Hannibal are acting in concert or not. All of this may be contrived to suggest an alternative narrative. Hannibal is the master of misdirection and Will is equally capable. Du Maurier is not without her talents, either.

Jack sighs and rubs at eyes that burn with fatigue.

He found not one drawing of Du Maurier and that is a most glaring omission. No personal items of hers are in evidence anywhere in the house. Du Maurier does not live here, nor is she a frequent guest. As his former and current psychiatrist, she must be aware of Hannibal's…preoccupation with Will. She must have seen the living room and deliberately sent Jack here.

Will chose not to tell Jack though he had plenty of opportunity to do so. Du Maurier wanted to expose Hannibal and Will. Had wanted Jack to know Hannibal had sat down to dessert with both Will and her.

Du Maurier appears more and more the jealous mistress, piqued at realizing she will never be the bride.

Jack wonders at Du Mauier's role in Ruggerio's death. He also wonders how much of Will's experience was hallucinated and how much was consensual. It appears that Hannibal prepared dinner and his tableaux here at the villa. Here is where Hannibal stripped and bathed Will that much is clear. He doubts Will climbed in the bathtub himself to willingly become part of Hannibal's tableau. It's what happened between dinner and the tub that Jack wants to know.

He thinks it unlikely Hannibal brought Will here already drugged, though it is possible he drugged Will and Ruggerio, maybe separately, maybe together. Perhaps Hannibal and Du Maurier drugged them. The empty tumblers by the piano suggest Will and Hannibal likely had some whiskey together. Jack thinks a drugged Will would have been too incapacitated to indulge which suggests more unwelcome scenarios.

Jack had not ordered any further testing on Will at the hospital because the Polizia would have been privy to the results. At the time, there was no justification for it. Jack had wanted Will to retain his autonomy and his freedom a while longer. Jack had not wanted evidence to surface that might have contradicted what Will had said at Boboli. Interpol and Polizia are already up his ass and there is not much room in there because Kade Purnell has taken up permanent residence.

Jack thinks he may have to be creative with the narrative he ultimately presents. It wouldn't be the first time.

Jack lifts the lid on the steamy glass covered plate and almost retches from the smell. He looks at the rotten cheese sprinkled with… Jack looks more closely and covers his mouth with his hand as he stares at the dead maggots stuck in the cheese. He backs away from the table to look at the menu as it were in context as his mind continues to spin theories.

How many lies did Will hide inside the truths he had served up at Boboli Gardens? Jack has to consider that Will continues to lie. He has graduated from his usual non-answers and vagaries to deliberate deception and misdirection. Just like Hannibal.

He thinks the only place they will find Ruggerio's prints are in the makeshift morgue Jack found downstairs. It had not been a surprise to find a door in the floor beneath the center island in the kitchen. There are only so many places for a cannibal to conceal his predilections. All three of them had dined around the table while Ruggerio had lain on cold metal bleeding out in the basement. Judging by the mattresses, surgical instruments, and work out gear the Paolini twins had also spent their last days in Hannibal's dungeon of horrors.

None of this, any of this, came as a surprise to Will. Jack knew he was keeping things from him, plausible deniability, an insanity plea...but this is unreal.

Jack is waiting for confirmation on the off shore bank account Du Maurier spoke of in the Cayman's. She clearly wants Jack to believe Hannibal left Will a get-away account, but Jack is not sure about that either. Hannibal deliberately placed her hair and her eagle feathers, from one of her hats apparently, in his tableaux. He wants Jack to believe Du Maurier is complicit. Will has given him nothing but vagaries about Du Maurier while Du Maurier gushes like an oil well with information about Will.

Nothing is at it appears and Jack is sinking, mired in inconsistencies, the lies the only constants in his dark sky.

Jack recognizes all that he has seen is anecdotal at this point. It will take time for forensics to bear it all out. Will has lost himself again. The attraction between him and Lecter is too powerful to counter the principled man he knows still resides within the mind Hannibal systematically shattered.

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford.

Will may be too far gone to save, but Jack owes it to him to try. Which is why he drove out to Impruneta by himself.

He knows Will, Hannibal, and Pazzi are likely with Mason Verger right now. Jack has left messages with all of them, even Hannibal. Hannibal must have Will's old phone, but the phone is off. So is Will's new phone. Pazzi's phone is active, but he won't answer, the calls go directly to voice mail. Clayton won't pick up either.

Doctor Clayton remains an integral yet elusive player in all this. Jack cannot figure him out. He has certainly proven himself capable of navigating Will's universe so far, but Jack wonders how much longer Clayton can keep afloat. In light of the evidence Jack has seen here, he wonders how much longer Will can protect him.

Jack slams his fist on the table. *What are Hannibal and Will and Du Maurier up to?*

Jack feels like a drink. Hannibal's villa is filled with exotic and expensive wines and liquors, why not? The wine cellar is fully stocked…again, but Jack doesn't want or need wine. He is tempted to pour himself a tumbler full of the exquisitely aged scotch he noticed Hannibal keeps in the crystal decanter sitting on the elegant console table in the foyer. He considers the linens on the table and is just about to wrap one of the satin napkins around a heavy crystal tumbler when his phone chirps in his pocket.

"What is it, Zee?"

"Oh my God, Jack…you're not going to believe this…"

Jack absently reaches for the decanter of scotch sans napkin as Zee's voice explodes into his ear. The Paolini's abandoned slaughter house is burning…

Chapter End Notes

Notes on Chapter 79
"I have great faith in fools - self-confidence my friends will call it." Edgar Allan Poe, Marginalia
So then faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10:17
For the day of vengeance was in my heart and my year of redemption has come. Isaiah 63:3
I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. John 8:12
Behold I stand at the door and knock… Revelation 3:20
Eye of the needle… Mark 10:23
Mason utters a twist on Job 31:29
Mason, Will, and Hannibal lift and twist passages from John 8:12 and John 10:9 – 13
Mason loses it quoting from Matthew 27:31
Hannibal quotes from Baudelaire's Song of Autumn from Les Fleurs du Mal

Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

> Troy burns and Agamemnon escapes.
>
> “What is his nature, Will? What do you see when you look out that window?”
>
> All the impressions he has collected of Pazzi twist as they always do like clusters of vines within the darker recesses of his mind. Assuming Pazzi’s perspective is instantaneous and the parking lot below evaporates as he walks through the evening in Pazzi’s shoes. The window in his mind replaces the actual pane his fingers press against, the cool slippery glass a tactile tether that keeps him from drifting completely away.
>
> “He’s still here.” Will says after a moment, “He won’t leave until we’re all dead. He’s watching and waiting for us to kill everyone else.” Will stares into the glass at Hannibal’s reflection watching his face shift with the shadows as he draws nearer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 80

Troy burns and Agamemnon escapes.

Gladiatore Morente, Roberto Ferri

Then Achilles went after godlike Polydorus, Priam's son. His father had forbidden him to fight, being his youngest son and dearest to him. He was the fastest runner of them all, but foolishly displaying his turn of speed, running about near the front lines, he lost his life to swift-footed Achilles, who caught him with a cast of his spear, as he shot by, in the back where the corselet overlapped and the golden clasps of his belt were fastened. The spear point emerged beside the navel, and he slumped to his knees with a groan, clutching his guts in his hands, as darkness enveloped him.

Iliad, Book XX

Hannibal's fingers work in the dark with his usual efficiency confident he will not injure Will as he cuts through the cables of rope binding biceps and torso to the dolly. He needs the precious first moments of confusion to release Will from his bonds. He frowns slightly as he slices the braided cord, the bonds that bind him literally and the troublesome figurative bonds that would keep him tethered to his inferno. As he presses Ajax's knife into Will's open palm the slender fingers he longs to feel upon his skin again close around his and he whispers into the darkness, lips hovering over bristled cheek.

"Move fast. Cut your legs free. I'll not touch you again. If anyone else comes near…it's not me."

Hannibal breathes deeply inhaling Will's musky sweetness though his scent is diluted in the filth of Mason's arena. The scent he recognizes as readily as his own mingles with the blood and the aroma of rust tainted water that drifts from smooth bared skin and disheveled shirt. Will's face is so close Hannibal can sense its shape as breath soft and warm as a kiss alights upon his cheek. He lingers a moment to share in that breath and to bestow another as surely as God had breathed life into Adam most beloved of all his creations. His fingers seek a fistful of damp curls and he gently jerks the tousled mane, a token tug of encouragement before leaving Patroclus armed once again with his spear.

The token tug sends his heart to tingling, echoes of consonant vibrations thrumming from Will's chest. The chords fall melodious to cinch around the wound a visceral dulcet ache Hannibal bears with a grimace. Only Will could cause the conflagration of emotions swelling inside to accompany this symphony they write in darkness divided from the light.

Will is quite capable of handling himself. His instincts when he chooses to follow them are as pure and primal as Hannibal's. They are so alike and yet…guilt and regret sent him to his inferno and his desire to escape from it sent him here. Hannibal does not doubt Will's immediate intentions. There is no mistaking the predator when it gleams behind the sea of blue. But, Will had been drifting into his retreats all during dinner and has not fully emerged from those places he goes, and though he is not fighting his instincts now, he wrestles still.

Did you come here to be saved, Will?

Did I?

Patroclus will bury his spear in his enemies with Achilles at his side. He will exult in the killing, taking his visceral pleasures from indulging his instincts but once his enemies have been vanquished, his role of Patroclus will be fulfilled. Will will become the petulant Adam, finding sin in his every action and thought, eager to punish himself because God applauds his nature. And so, he will punish the creator as well.

Yes, the fourth, when the motif of Fate has been utterly destroyed, deconstructed. Ultimately… defeating Fate.

Or accepting Fate.

Leave it to Will to take Hannibal's words, give them a dunking in ambiguity, intentions wrung out and left to dry. Their ideals of Fate would appear to strike dissonant chords and Adam may be endeavoring to meet his maker in more intimate surroundings. As for accepting fate, it occurs to Hannibal that Will may not have been referring to himself. Predictably unpredictable…his Will. Hannibal begins to see designs within Will's design. It's not that Will cannot see the garden; he does not want to see it.

Trust is not a rose that blooms easily in our garden, is it?

Trust will grow in their garden to blossom like blushing lips beneath his own, crushed crimson flesh warm and fragrant with whiskey and lust. Hannibal would have it so.

Like the spirit of God moving upon the water, Hannibal slips through the darkness he has unleashed upon the face of the deep. From out of the darkness will come light, from the destruction will come creation. Will's inferno burns in his mind and Hannibal has supplied the elements of deliverance imparting darkness to fuel the flames that would extinguish the ambivalence that keeps him there.

Hannibal finishes what the intuitive Clayton had begun; destroying the layers of denial, a deconstruction of self in a safe drug induced environment. Hannibal has done Clayton one better in creating for Will a real playground with which to indulge his inspirations and providing actual prey with which to engage his instincts and sate his predatory appetites. Constructive destruction. While Will experiences the intense pleasure Hannibal knows he craves, those positive associations Hannibal has unfailingly reinforced will shine like beacons within the void of his inferno.

Hannibal would keep his universe cloaked in darkness a little longer to cast its pall on everyone, snuffing out light and stealing sight. All of them reduced in an instant to blind men stumbling around to Beethoven's glorious fourth and final movement of his *Fifth Symphony*. This final *allegro* is eleven minutes of pure majesty and the immortal movement is barely half complete. A lot can happen in seven minutes.

He moves toward the door situated at the end of the wall of windows, an entrance to the suite of damaged offices on the other side, an alternate exit he knows Cordell stumbles toward, clutching his ruined ear and likely a scalpel as he wheels the gasping Mason to safety. Hannibal will allow Cordell to secure Mason safely behind the door ensconced in his wheelchair, its oxygen tank protected behind wood and metal no longer exposed and vulnerable to errant projectiles, like the bullets from Pazzi's service Berretta.

He thinks Pazzi intelligent enough not to discharge his weapon in the darkness, but desperation and fear often rob lesser men of their senses. Pazzi represents the least of men among them, his badge an affront to law enforcement, a most contemptible affront soon to be remedied. He hears the Casaletto boys approaching, smells the perspiration drenched leather of their jackets, a faint wafting of chocolate and the pine balsam notes of their deodorant. Pazzi is more difficult to detect though the odor of cigarettes hangs in the air, a stale scent that stirs with the constant movement.

Before darkness had descended suddenly bringing blind Fate and insanely loud Fury upon them, Cordell had watched and listened to the turning tide and had weighed his options, deciding which actions would best serve his employer and himself. Lecter has outmanoeuvred Mr. Verger and frightened the children with his pretty soliloquy on music and fate, but Graham is right about one thing. The game is not fixed and Cordell will write his own ending.

He reaches down, feels along the metal and deftly releases the brake on Mr. Verger's chair. The music buzzes dreadfully; his naked eardrum thrums with the raw grating in his head. He glances in the direction of the dolly but he hears nothing thanks to the full orchestra spilling from the speakers. The air is moist and charged with chemicals, body odour rank with fear and adrenaline and the smell of sweaty animals and manure mingles with the scent of the hay below.

The Paolini have released their man eating hogs into the slaughter pit and Cordell imagines their muzzles sniffing at the odour of fresh blood floating down from the second level to seduce their carnivorous cravings. Hooves paw impatiently at the ground and the grunting of the incensed and ravenous beasts hums beneath the horns and violins.

"*Fanculo! Dov'è*? Where did he go?"

"He was right here…"

"*Fottermi*… I can't see shit."

“I can smell it…the pigs…they released the fucking pigs!”

Tano presses against his brother’s back, reaches around his arm to draw him close. “Shhhhh…”

“The music is still playing.” Rosso whispers, “It’s not the power, just the lights.”

“Where’s the switch?”

“I’ll get the lights.” Pazzi says, “There’s a door at the end of the windows.”

“What if somebody is already there?”

“Then, you’d better get there first.” Pazzi says.

Pazzi edges away from the boys, service Berretta drawn, taking one step at a time toward the control panel behind the coffee table. Not for the light switch, the envelope. Pazzi knows exactly how he’s going to escape the madness Lecter unleashed. He could turn on the lights and unplug the sound system, but why would he do that?

Pazzi knows Graham is still tied to the dolly, he can hear him struggling against his bonds, huffing in the darkness. Which means Lecter must be somewhere else…

Cordell wheels his shocked charge across the floor, his dead knuckles skimming the wall beneath the row of windows where the useless Pazzi spent most of his time holding his dick and a cigarette. Cordell knows Pazzi will find the envelope or die trying but he has to get Mr. Verger out of here and to the SUV parked in the lot. He’ll have to take the chance that the Paolini are out there, but he thinks dodging bullets is better than dodging Lecter.

Lecter likes his games and apparently prefers to hunt in the dark. Cautiously, Cordell moves through the black foreboding firmament a fish in Lecter’s murky pond, the wall guiding him as his feet creep quickly along the cement. *Almost there…*

Complacency had cost Cordell most of his outer ear. Graham had chomped down on the upper half taking most of the auricle section and leaving the lobe to hang grotesquely from shredded skin and cartilage. Without the outer ear to focus sound waves, Cordell cannot distinguish direction from his right. The pounding pain inside his head further obscures sound, and Cordell finds he has to constantly move his head to discern from which direction noise comes. He figures he may as well accept his ear is gone.

Gone, but not forgotten, filching the chunk of his ear from the floor had occurred to Cordell, but the air of certain victory had departed, uncertainty had spilled into Cordell’s gut, a damp coldness had settled there and he had instinctively held his ground, nursing his wound rather than step toward Graham again to retrieve his severed flesh while the fickle winds of Fate had kept changing direction much like the voices in the dark reverberate in his head. Graham’s deceptively mild visage had caught him off guard and as the smell of his blood flows up his nostrils he thinks he will enjoy a chance to savage that face a piece at a time with the razor sharp blade he clutches as he ushers Mr. Verger along.

Lecter is indeed the wolf scattering the sheep but before he wrenches that victory entirely out of Mr. Verger’s gaping mouth Cordell would snatch it back. Escape and live to fight another day. The doorknob turns with difficulty, years of disuse choking the inner mechanism and Cordell shoves the heavy wooden door swollen with humidity wide and wheels the unwieldy throne and oxygen tank through. He shifts forward preparing to allow the door to swing shut behind him when he feels his collar tighten about his throat as strong fingers scrape along his skin and jerk him backward and out the door. Teeth gnash together as much from the thudding pain in his head as the hatred that gathers in his jaw, bones seeming to grind of their own volition.

“Where do you think you’re going, eh?” A Casaletto brother hisses from the dark.

“Let go of me you stupid fuck.” Cordell says shoving the boy backward.

“Who you calling a…AGHHHHH!”

There is a click of metal as Hannibal’s switchblade flicks open. Hannibal slips his left arm around the boy’s throat, lifting him off the floor. His intention is to slit the boy’s throat but the boy kicks and a sharp pain registers in his left knee and he loses his hold settling for impaling the boy’s right side, forcing the blade past bone.

“Rosso!” the boy cries, slumping against Hannibal’s sturdy frame, “*Aiutami!”*

“I’m here…” the other yells, “Where’s Pazzi?”

“Good question.” Hannibal whispers into the boy’s ear.

Hannibal talks over the gasps and whines of the struggling boy too stunned to raise the knife he holds though Hannibal is impressed he has not dropped it. Glass shimmers above, a row of industrial sized windows that line the walls just below the ceiling nothing more than reflected ink, but movement registers, black shadows upon a dim sea.

Hannibal sinks the knife between the lower ribs, seventh and eighth, he thinks and…shifting the blade downward, likely tears through the boy’s liver. He pulls his knife back out feeling the slick of blood trickle down his hand. Terrified cries interspersed with helpless epithets gush from Tano’s mouth as blood spills from the wound. The boy’s knees are already buckling beneath him when his brother rakes his blade along Hannibal’s back, shredding leather from shoulder to waist.

He miscalculates distance in the darkness, the blade does not break skin but Hannibal knows he won’t make the same mistake twice. Hannibal flexes against Tano’s throat feeling his jugular pulse beneath his arm and Hannibal squeezes tighter reducing the flow of oxygen and blood. Until Will turns on the lights he will have to make do. He turns quickly toward the other using the wounded brother as a shield instead.

The office door slams. Cordell is gone, and Mason with him.

Starlight streams from the large industrial windows above but the sprinkling of twinkling dots does little to illuminate the pit below. Pazzi’s senses throb with the movement all around him, ears humming with the sounds of hushed voices of the brothers and the scraping of heels as they head toward the exit while the music bellows loudly. He listens to the constant din of stampeding hooves over the bewildering blaring music as he moves ever closer to the coffee table and the envelope.

The crazy Paolini not only turned out the lights; they released the hogs into the slaughter pit. A most vexing problem Lecter has likely prepared for. *Scopare il Paolini!* Only Lecter knows what they are up to outside. Pazzi’s gut tells him Lecter cut the Paolini loose preferring to tear the place apart himself. Whether or not that includes Graham…well, Pazzi has his gun. Graham is still strapped to the dolly, unarmed and Lecter likes his knives or his bare hands. Lecter's *modus operandi* does not include firearms, just…arms.

Bodies move in the darkness, Pazzi hears the scuffle of shoes grinding into pavement. He hears the creak of a door and the low rumble of Cordell's voice in the air then one of Casaletto brothers in answer, until his words are lost in his scream. Lecter…

"Rosso!" the boy cries, "*Aiutami!"*

"I'm here…" the other yells, "Where's Pazzi?"

Pazzi stands stock still his hand gripping his Berretta as he moves it from side to side in the darkness. He can't see a damned thing but his neck tingles, tiny hairs stand straight up from his skin to shiver instinctively with the rush of adrenaline through his body. The Casaletto brothers had agreed to rush Lecter and Pazzi had agreed to join them, but that was before the lights had gone out. All bets are off now.

If he fires he may hit someone and though he doesn't really care who, he knows if he hits one of the Casaletto boys, the other will come after him. The Casaletto brothers are not packing and Pazzi has a full magazine, but shooting in the dark is too risky. The boys are edgy. Lecter has obviously spooked them, rattling centuries of superstition hanging from their Catholic necks no doubt sending them to uttering silent prayers and kissing the gold plated medallions of their favorite saint before they had jumped him.

There is also the matter of Verger's oxygen tank. Verger may or may not be on the other side of the door, but bullets ricochet and even if the tank did not explode, an oxygen leak in this decrepit chemical corroded slaughter house would be very bad. The crazy Paolini may have been willing to risk it, but Pazzi is not.

Besides, firing off a round would also reveal their positions for a fraction of a second and he doesn't want that either. Pazzi could simply turn on the lights if he wanted everyone to know where he was. Pazzi edges ever closer to the coffee table and the manila envelope a foot at a time…

"Pazzi…la luce, la luce...per favore!"

As the Casaletto brothers scream for the lights in vain he hears the clank of metal from the dolly hitting the floor just before the wind is knocked out of him. Graham is loose.

The dolly clatters behind Will immediately swallowed up in the glow of golden flames that lick through the walls, baking the concrete so the cinder blocks disintegrate into ashes and float above the blaze like grey confetti. The slaughter pit is engulfed in Will's inferno and he gazes through the rust hued haze only he can see.

He is focused on the pair of fiery red coals rushing toward him through the swirls of smoke and sifting ash. The canopy of feathers shifts over his shoulders and he moves with his infernal companion, its great wings glossing over him as he braces himself for the collision. An intruder has breached his inferno.

If anyone else comes near...it's not me.

Will peers into the burning pair of eyes through the hazy coral colored smoke as the winged creature bears down on him. His mouth hangs open as a shudder threads up his spine. This is not an intruder. Drawing a shaky breath he stares into his own face, a wicked demonic reflection that glides upon the air on its own glossy wings that dip gracefully so they graze the ground gleaming in the darkness. Will sucks in a steadying gulp of air as they collide. His infernal reflection dissolves on impact; a lustrous dusting that seems to implode inside him. He feels his heart thudding away in his chest and Will closes his eyes as stomach muscles contract around the thing inside curling slithering deliciously through his bowels as he tumbles in the darkness from the jagged cliff into the abyss of his fiery inferno.

His dizzying descent stops abruptly and he drops into a cushion of black feathers as talons streak across his bare chest. He struggles against the red rimmed eyed creature and they roll upon the sooty ground until Will is lying flat on his stomach pinned beneath its weight. The feathers recede into the ground in a shimmer of firelight. Something else slithers on top of him. Surreal currents coursing through him, his body awash in sensation, he blinks drawn back into the moment by the hoarse voice cracking from above him in the darkness.

"*Fanculo…*Graham*…"*

Pazzi's voice registers as does the smell of his cigarette laden suit. It is only then that Will remembers he clutches the knife Hannibal gave him in his hand. Will writhes beneath Pazzi, his arms twisted and caught between his body and the floor. Unable to wrench his hand free without cutting himself he holds his knife tightly while his feet slip along the cement seeking traction as he raises his hips from off the ground to dislodge Pazzi from his back. Pazzi's legs disentangle from Will's and his body spirals up like a snake's trying to scramble away his feet kicking at Will's face. A yelp of pain erupts as a heel makes contact with his mouth, and Will tastes the metallic warmth on his tongue.

Hunting is a pleasure, we are born to it. A pleasure we can share…

A deluge of noise comes from the wall of windows. Golden flames climb the walls while rust and ash whirl in the air, tiny flares of red soot before his eyes. Will listens to the muffled Italian curses and cries of pain as his imagination conjures images of the struggle by the door at the far end.

Hannibal…

Will utters the name under his breath, syllables sticking to his lips like a prayer and the invocation sends Will to shuddering as a river of emotions rushes past him and Will feels caught between rocks as merciless rapids threaten to take him under.

You must allow yourself to become intimate with your instincts, Will.

Will lets go of the trouser leg he had managed to grab onto, fabric scorching hot between his fingers and he lets Pazzi slip from his grasp. A moment later he hears a shattering of glass and imagines the butt of Pazzi's Berretta crashing through one of the windows behind him.

When you find what you seek, you will thrill to it. And you will hate yourself for wanting the thrill. But that is who you are.

I know who I am, Daniel.

Adapt. Evolve. Become.

Yes, I think you do.

Will he pushes off the floor and heads for the control panel. Some dishes are indeed better when served cold. Especially Italian he thinks with a wry smile. The fog of his inferno clears; clarity descends with the thoughts of the carnage to come. Will's muscles flinch and his nostrils quiver with the scent of blood and metal and hay and sweat, every nerve tingles with predatory awareness. The feeling is pure and positively primal.

His hands grope along the wall until he finds the panel and then the switches, fingers seeking the grimy plastic ones passing over the pristine switches mounted on the fresh lumber beneath. He lifts up the switch and the upper level is flooded with light once again and Will squints into the brightness as he starts from the wall.

He feels…alive.

He notes the broken shards of glass on the floor and pieces hanging from the cracked pane of glass. The coffee table is in disarray but Will notices immediately the absence of the manila envelope. Pazzi has escaped with his prize. There are only a few places Pazzi will go. He can't claim his reward until the bank opens tomorrow.

He lifts his head, scanning the upper level. His eyes are immediately drawn to the railing where Hannibal squares off against the Casaletto brothers. Cordell is conspicuously absent. Luminous dark eyes peer at him from above one of the brother's heads. Will returns the gaze and notes the slight curvature of Hannibal's lips the locking of their eyes summons. Longing erupts spontaneous and deep from his chest an aching as raw as the nerves throbbing beneath his flesh. Head up, Will strides across the grit and gravel of his inferno through the falling ash his jaw tight and grim though a sliver of a smile tugs at his lips as his fingers coil around the familiar handle of the claw shaped knife. Patroclus prepares to join Achilles.

The lights flicker, once, twice, and the generator booms filling the pit with the hum of fluorescent tubing overhead. The boys freeze, blinking in bewilderment, but Hannibal knows the source of the light as he squints at the lean figure cross the concrete floor wiping blood from his mouth. Will kicks Cordell's' ear out of his path into the pit and then pauses long enough to glance over the railing at the stomping and snorting below to see the pigs trample one another to retrieve it. The petty indulgence elicits a juicy tremor of affection.

Both Casaletto boys are too dumbfounded to make a move, literally, and Hannibal shoves the wounded younger Casaletto aside in greeting, one eye toward the older and less injured brother. Like the proverbial deer in headlights, their reptile brains surge with neurons releasing a flood of ancestral responses alerting them to cognizance. They are not the hunters here; they are the prey.

"Right on time." The greeting is delivered with a note of cheeriness.

"You're welcome." Comes the tart reply, tone tired and sour as a discarded lemon, his mind already mind assessing and assimilating the scene before him. So infuriating…

Still, the sight of Will's blood streaked visage and billowing shirt as he advances barefoot toward him exhilarates. He doesn't have time to revel in Will's predatory elegance however. The brothers are not as enamoured with Will's appearance as Hannibal and they exchange glances as Rosso moves toward his wounded brother.

Associations come quickly and as Will's mind absorbs every detail of the boys he is reminded of the photo of Ruggerio and Alonso, standing side by side, his arm slung over his brother's shoulder. Weariness tugs at his mouth; at least these two will die together.

Rosso paces beside his brother with one arm outstretched brandishing his gleaming blade, eyes darting between Hannibal and his suffering sibling who weaves trying not to sink to the floor but stubbornly clings to life and his weapon.

"Ima gonna kill you." Rosso says feet shifting from side to side unsure how to handle this double threat.

Hannibal's eyes do not move from the bundle of blood and breath that is the Casaletto boy. "Pazzi?" he calls to Will.

"Gone. Broke a window and got out." Will says with marked annoyance as he draws closer. "Cordell?"

"Offices. Mason, too. Their SUV is parked outside."

Hannibal watches Rosso's eyes dart back and forth. The news of Pazzi's escape is disappointing but the slippery Polizia captain will not get far.

"We need to finish this."

"Agreed." Will says.

Hannibal turns to Will and finds the deadly gleam dancing behind the sea of pale blue he had seen with the Paolini in the alley. The stormy eyes soften slightly beneath his gaze and Hannibal's eyes flick toward the exit.

A tingling of sweat and musk and Will is gone, he sails through the office door without a backward glance. Words are often so unnecessary between them. He turns his full and predatory attention to the Casaletto brothers.

Wounded and gasping for air, the younger Casaletto valiantly holds his ground next to his brother. Rosso still believes he has a fighting chance. He brandishes his blade and rushes Hannibal. It is just the kind of heroic maneuver Hannibal would expect with a surname such as Casaletto. The blood of ancient Romans flows through Rosso's veins and he will die fighting like his ancestors.

The boy's head lands hard in Hannibal's gut, blade slicing at leather then down finally sinking it into a fleshy thigh. Hannibal winces at the necessary sacrifice and sinks his blade into the boy's clavicle causing him to stumble back. Rosso waves his knife through the air and glances at the ground where drops of blood from his left shoulder have begun to collect.

"Tano! Release the pigs!" Rosso's mouth peels back into a savage smile.

"The pigs…*Merda…Come mai?"* Tano's voice rings out as he stumbles toward the ramp doing as his older brother commands.

"You don't want to go down there." Hannibal huffs.

"*Per l'more di Dio*, open the gate, Tano!" Rosso implores his confused brother.

Rosso wants his fighting chance. He thinks to release Mason's hogs from the pit, allow them to stampede the ramp. He hopes his brother can climb on the railing as the pigs run up the narrow short ramp rather than leave him to Hannibal. With the release of the pigs, Rosso and his brother would cease to be Hannibal's primary concern. It would be a good plan except that Rosso does not understand the nature of Mason's pigs.

"Is the gate unlocked?" Tano yells from the top of the ramp.

"Let's find out." Hannibal says thinking how fickle the Fates when demanding their fun.

He does not have the time to explain about the pigs and doubts the boys would believe him if he did. Mason and Cordell are waiting, and so is Will. Hannibal pounds across the cement with Rosso right behind him. The boy follows close and jumps Hannibal from behind as expected. He rakes at Hannibal's back, cussing vehemently triumphant as the knife punctures the thick leather and plunges into Hannibal's left shoulder.

The knife is sharp but Hannibal does not feel the pressure of the hilt upon his flesh. The thick leather catches on the metal makes it difficult to move the knife around and sure enough Rosso has to wriggle his blade to pry it loose. Hannibal grimaces in pain as the boy withdraws it and strikes again. The blade shreds the thick leather again and again shredding the thin flesh beneath.

Hannibal throws his weight backward, jostles the surprised boy. Rosso loses his balance, slips, grasping at the sleeves of soft leather and Hannibal shakes him off jabbing backward. His blade finds its mark and the boy staggers clutching at his bleeding upper thigh. Hannibal does not hesitate. He'd prefer to keep the boys from the gate. He grabs the front of Rosso's jacket and pulls him up. Footfalls of the younger Casaletto clatter ahead as Tano continues to amble toward the end of the ramp in an unsteady gait.

With brutal efficiency Hannibal hurls Rosso down the ramp sending him stumbling into his brother. Limbs flail as both boys grapple with the gravity and each other trying to get up.

Hannibal closes the few feet between them quickly. He reaches toward the stronger brother clutching a handful of Rosso's greased hair intending to impale the boy. Rosso rips his head from Hannibal's hold, groaning as flesh and follicles are torn from his scalp. The hair slips from Hannibal's fingers and he steps back.

An animal is most dangerous when it is frightened and Rosso is definitely frightened. Rosso charges Hannibal again. Arms wave helplessly, blade slicing through air like a fan, but the movement is desperate and clumsy. Opportunity beckons and Hannibal lunges at the boy; the scent of leather laden sweat laced with fear fills his nostrils. Rosso stiffens as Hannibal's fingers graze his neck. The tattered leather folds into his fingertips as he pulls on the jacket collar of the Casaletto boy.

"*Fottermi!*" The older brother yelps, heels scraping cement as he turns wildly to look down the ramp. "Tano!"

"Tano…" Hannibal calls out, fingers digging into leather, "Don't unlock the gate. Mason's pigs are not what you think."

Mason's Tuscan pigs have been bred with an ancient breed distinguishable by their markings, solid black with white circling the midriff as though painted there. And these pigs are larger, even more ferocious than their American counterparts back in Baltimore.

But these are not the only reasons Mason’s pigs are especially threatening at the moment. Mason loves his Beethoven that is true, but he plays the first movement of Beethoven’s *Fifth* because that piece of music was used to condition his pigs. They are agitated not only by the smell of blood and human flesh, but by the music as well. Associations. They associate the music with a meal. If Tano manages to unlock the gate all hell will truly break loose.

The boy shifts in his grasp, twisting his body, he groans, and Hannibal catches the ripple of movement as the slice of the boy’s blade leaves a swath of air to Hannibal’s left.

Hannibal swerves to his right, avoiding a crippling slice to his knees. “This…is going to hurt I’m afraid.”

Hannibal slams the boy into the railing head first, triggering fingers to open and the blade in his hands to drop. It pings to the floor, and Hannibal kicks it across the platform but Rosso is quick and grabs it before it can slide over the edge into the pit. He leaps up from the floor and runs straight at Hannibal, blood streaming from the gash in his forehead.

Amidst the clamor of horns and violins and the snorts of impatient pigs eager for their meal Hannibal turns, traverses down the ramp, knowing Rosso follows. The grunts and poetry of life… and death seem to surround him. Fate trumpets from the speakers and the swell of violins coincides with the scuff of feet behind him.

“Don’t…” Hannibal starts almost close enough to touch the frightened boy.

“Unlock the gate, Tano!” Rosso cries unwittingly uttering his last words.

The younger brother hesitates, and his hesitation is all Hannibal requires. Hannibal feels the approach of the other brother like breath upon his neck. He turns and meets Rosso head on, swinging his arm low he slices into knees that buckle immediately and Rosso goes down. Hannibal grabs him by the collar and drags him over to the railing. Flesh collides with the flaking metal railing and a whelp of pain erupts.

Rosso tries to crawl away from the railing and pushes off the floor. He gulps down air and clenches his empty fist, eyes scanning the ground for his knife. Hannibal kicks it under the gate, bulging with the bodies of sweaty hogs. The gate will not hold them for long, locked or not. The upper level is safe only if the pigs are feeding.

Hannibal stands over Rosso, gazes into the blood spattered face a moment.

“*Per favore….Dios mio…*” The broken boy sobs, crossing himself. *“Oh Signore Gesù, mi perdone i miei peccati…”*

“I forgive you.” Hannibal says, “What God does, is entirely up to him.”

Forgiveness invites mercy and Hannibal bestows it swiftly taking Rosso’s head to cradle in his hand very much like he had held Will’s face in his kitchen. He stares into the boy’s befuddled brown eyes that widen in shock too late. Blood spurts from the gaping wound Hannibal carves across his throat as the blade cuts through soft tissue and larynx before the boy can make a sound.

“Rosso? Rosso!!!” Tano cries.

Hannibal brushes past the stunned Tano and lifts the limp form up and over the railing. He shoves Rosso into the pit and watches the pigs begin their vicious evisceration, tearing cloth from limbs and torso to get at the meat beneath.

“No, NO, NO…” Tano sobs behind him.

Hannibal turns from the debacle of flesh to face the tragedy that is about to befall the younger brother.

Tano’s fingers clench at his wound as he leans over the railing; the sight of his brother’s body buried beneath the blood drenched snouts of Mason’s pigs brings anguished cries from deep in his throat. The cries cease immediately as Hannibal shatters his skull on the railing and flips him into the pit to join his brother. He is quickly swallowed up in the frenzy that follows.

Upon one of his many trips to Siena to visit Du Maurier, Hannibal had stopped to admire the medieval frescoes along the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico in the Piazza del Campo, and had beheld an image of the same curiously marked pig in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s *Effects of Good Government,* one of the many surviving murals. Almost eaten to extinction by the Italians for its especially tasty meat, the *cinta senese* is now an endangered breed of pig, just like Mason.

God is matchless in his irony as Mason is about to learn, if there is any functioning grey matter left in his head with which to appreciate his predicament. Hannibal hopes there is. He leaves the pigs to their dinner and ascends the ramp at brisk pace. Dessert is next on the menu.

Will moves through the musty office quickly and with quiet stealth as he winds around the desks Cordell arranged to block his path, hoping darkness would prevail. Since it has not, Will can see the office quite clearly. The light shining from the slaughter pit illuminates the forsaken place its dreary walls and discarded filing cabinets in plain view. He ignores the flames that follow him along the dirty floor speckled with paint chips and flecks of debris and pauses to gaze out the large grime streaked windows into the parking lot. He sees the black SUV that must be Mason’s. The Paolini have departed but the Casaletto’s Cadillac remains beneath the starlit sky and the large orange tinged moon.

Pazzi’s possible intentions after stealing away in the darkness prick at Will’s skull. He thinks Pazzi must have forgotten to grab the keys from the Casaletto brothers or, he had other means of transportation waiting for him. Will doubts Pazzi expected to leave with Mason. Will doubts Hannibal expected Pazzi to leave at all and the feeling that he has disappointed Hannibal gnaws at him. He chews at his lip, annoyed that he feels disappointment, tired of berating himself for his usual sins.

I hate that I want this.

Is it the hating that you love, or is it the loving that you hate?

Will sighs. Hannibal may get what he wants by attrition. He surveys the moonlit area out front a moment longer. The parking lot appears quiet and deserted from the window. He hears the clanking of metal grinding on metal and a muffled chime…it sounds like an elevator from the other side of the exit door. Will moves from the window as the creature inside moves, seeming more animated since the collision with his infernal reflection and he proceeds to the door, lifts the handle and slowly opens it onto a landing. He sees steps immediately. He dismisses the image of Cordell hefting Mason down those steep stairs.

Off to his left comes the unmistakable sound of wheezing…or breathing through a lipless mouth. The doors of the service elevator at the end of the landing are wide open and inside sits Mason in his wheelchair. Will squeezes the knife; fingers caress its pearlescent handle as he considers the situation. Cordell must have just depressed the hold button which means…

Will is suddenly propelled back inside by the office door slamming into his face as the elevator doors close on Mason.

Will crawls along the floor on all fours and is grabbed by the hair and yanked up onto his knees from behind. He struggles against Cordell's hold on him, his scalp aflame his skull already tender from the butt of Pazzi's and Tano's guns. He sees the flash of the metal scalpel before he feels it slice into his flesh from temple to cheek bone, the blade is ice but the blood that courses down his neck runs hot. This is a sensation he has experienced before.

"I'm going to slice your face off…" Cordell mumbles ominously raising his hand for another pass.

Will grins tightly in the dim light tasting blood from his throbbing nose. Cordell has just announced he has but one primary objective. Will can use that. Already holding the blade out from his fist, Will plunges his knife backwards and it sinks into flesh, someplace vulnerable Will hopes. Cordell yelps in pain, lets go of Will's hair to attend to the blood seeping from his stomach. The wound will bleed slowly, this Will knows intimately. Cordell was stabbed just now, not opened up as he was. Cordell will be quite mobile and dangerous a while longer.

Will's bare feet slip in the blood spattered floor as he rights himself. Cordell stumbles back leaving a trail of blood behind him. Regaining his balance, Will stumbles after him.

Cordell waits by one of the desks he had shoved to the middle of the room to aid his escape. A dark red blossom stains his untucked shirt but Cordell is not looking at his wound. He stares at Will so full of venom he has to spit some out.

"You think you can kill me with that knife?" Cordell spews the words like his spit.

"At least as much as you think you can kill me with that scalpel." Will says placing his hands flat on the desk, tauntingly leaning forward on his elbows toward Cordell.

"I'm not going kill you with the scalpel. I'm going to maim you with it."

Will's mouth melts into a frown as he traces a finger through the dust.

"I found your ear but you'll have to wrestle the pigs for it." He smiles a little unable to help himself.

Cordell flings a folding metal chair at Will before lunging at him, scalpel first. Will deflects the chair easily, Cordell not so much.

Anticipating the sweep of the scalpel, Will ducks and ducks again, shifting his weight and position as the wounded Cordell lunges again and again. Will could rush him, but Will is not willing to risk losing an eye in the event Cordell is not weakened enough to collapse. There are however, other means of bringing him down.

It is evident the damage Will inflicted on his right ear has left him in pain, but Will notices the injury is debilitating in other ways. His inner ear pulses unprotected and the cacophony of sound is disorienting. Cordell's balance is off; he favors his right side and tries to shield it. The music continues to boom from the pit but Will needs more noise to rattle Cordell.

Will lowers his knife and drops it to the floor. He knows he is taking a chance, but stabbing Cordell to death is taking too long. Will turns quickly to avoid the glint of metal flashing before his eyes, his elbow connects with bone, jaw, Will thinks as Cordell sinks to his knees in pain. The shock of the painful impact shudders along Will's arm the sleeve is speckled with his own blood from the scraping of Cordell's teeth. Will picks up the metal chair from where it crashed, folds the seat in and as Cordell rises from the floor attempting to steady himself on one knee, Will bashes him on the right side of his head.

Cordell cries out and Will hears the unmistakable ka-ching of metal hitting the floor. Cordell has dropped his scalpel and Will kicks it under a desk and bends down to retrieve his knife. He sinks it quickly into his back pocket, and grasping the chair with both hands once again, he raises the chair over his head and advances on the kneeling Cordell.

Cordell clutches his ear, or what remains of it. The ringing and buzzing is beyond excruciating, the sound of the impact momentarily incapacitating. The music continues to pulse beneath the sound of everything else. He fights against the dizziness and forces himself to stand before Graham can smack him with the chair again. He lifts his eyes up to see Graham advancing on him, chair held high ready to deliver another blow.

Cordell lunges, a desperate hurl that pays off. He sends Graham backward, the chair he holds too unwieldy and he loses his balance toppling over his feet and dropping the chair to break his fall.

Will lands with a hard painful thud on top of the chair, bruising ribs in the process. Moving quickly, Will scrambles along the filthy floor, knees grazing the glowing gravel of his inferno. Hearing Cordell's footsteps he turns over to face him, concealing the blade in his back pocket.

He holds his hands out in front of him as much to shield himself from punches as to allow Cordell to see them empty. Cordell forgoes the punches and dives on Will instead. Will is slammed to the floor, head landing painfully on cement. Cordell is on top of him instantly, his huge hands coil around his throat and Will's hips are pinned beneath the girth of his bleeding belly. Before Cordell can break his neck in what would be an ironic turn of events, Will brings his hands up and plunges his fingers deep into Cordell's eyes squeezing so the balls are nearly forced from their sockets. Cordell's grip on his throat loosens and he screams in agony. The wound in his gut continues to weep red and unable to keep his hands around Will's throat and bear the searing pain in his head Cordell rears up.

Will's fingers drip pulp from Cordell's sockets too slippery to grasp the handle of his knife from his back pocket. He shifts beneath the weight on top of him and quickly lifts his bottom up from the floor so his fingers can remove his knife. He jams the blade into the blind Cordell's throat and rips the flesh open, skin and tissue part as though splitting a seam. The thing inside quivers and Will feels that dizzying sense of power he has missed and craved, it descends over him like the gush of blood that flows down his arms soaking his ruined shirt. Using the knife still lodged in Cordell's throat like a skewer, Will pushes the dazed and dying Cordell off of him content to lie still a moment as the tide of euphoria washes over him.

It is only after Cordell exhales his last breath, and slumps to the floor beside him that Will hears the scuff of shoes along the concrete, crisp quick steps that grind into the gritty floor as they navigate through the cluster of desks. He looks up to find Hannibal standing over him wearing that look of mild curiosity only he could pull off in such a situation. Will bites at his lip not sure if he's angry or pleased at seeing him.

"How long were you standing over there?" Will snaps, deciding he's angry.

"Long enough to watch you apply a little Abel Gideon to your repertoire." Hannibal offers his hand.

The pale blue eyes narrow as Will looks up at him from the floor. Hannibal takes quick inventory of the body sprawled beneath him noting the flushed skin and tremulous quivering of lips still sucking in air. His gaze is drawn to the deep gash to the side of Will's face, obviously Cordell's work. The red line is thin but likely deep, a diagonal slash from the hairline at his temple to cheek. He may require a stitch or two. He rolls his shoulder imagining both of them may require a stitch or two.

"Where's Mason?" Hannibal inquires imperious as always.

Will takes the hand Hannibal proffers, grasping it tightly as Hannibal pulls him up staring into the luminous eyes that shine with affection even as the features remain placid like polished stone though the creases around his mouth and eyes are sharper than usual. As Hannibal pulls him to his feet, a tic of discomfort tugs at tight lips and Will notes the blood splattered clothes and the shredded leather jacket suspecting some of the blood is his.

The dark eyes burrow into his, intensely close, and Will looks away breaking the hypnotic moment. When the warm hand remains wrapped around his once he is upright once again he slips his hand free but the tingling of warmth lingers, a curious sensation at odds with the damp bloody shirt that hangs cool against his skin.

Flames crackle in the silence, a pervasive sense of the surreal sends Will's head reeling, and he marvels how comfortable he feels in this universe they share, exclusive and intimate as though nothing else exists beyond the scope of this room. Images of colliding with his dream cloud his vision, the dust ignites along nerves like gunpowder, his inferno inseparable from waking life and the constant twitching in his gut relentlessly reminding him of the surreal encounter.

"He's in the service elevator…hyperventilating." Will blinks before he retreats any further.

Eager to avoid Hannibal's piercing and probing gaze, Will bends down and holding Cordell's head in place with his foot yanks his knife free from the splintered vertebrae the blade is jammed between.

"The Casaletto brothers?" Will says casually.

He starts to wipe off his knife on his shirt but his shirt is too damp to be of much use and he wipes it off on Cordell's trousers instead. Nerves crinkle like kindling and he feels elated, euphoric still from the thrill of the kill and he stares at the knife and his hands a moment longer…to enjoy the feeling.

"I left them feeding the pigs." Hannibal says raising a brow as Will stands up.

"You left the pigs feeding you mean." Will shoves his knife into his back pocket, hitching his thumb inside as he angles his head to look at Hannibal. "Not much meat on the Casaletto boys."

"Nor Mason. All gristle."

Will nods toward the windows. “Pazzi rode in with the Casaletto brothers. Their Cadillac is still in the lot. You saw more of the lot than I did. Do you think he’s still here?”

“Pazzi is our random element this evening. If he’s not here, there’s only one place he would go.”

“He’d go home. Tell the wife to pack. Hide somewhere until the bank opens and he can get to that safety deposit box.”

“I agree.” Hannibal says retrieving his phone from the front pocket of his trousers enjoying the quizzical frown from Will.

Will stares a moment at the ripped trouser leg and the stain of dark blood upon it as Hannibal stands phone in hand scrolling through his contacts a bemused creasing of lips as his eyes alight on the name he is looking for. Will marvels he had the stones to actually carry his phone with him into the slaughter house. His arrogance never fails to astound.

He steps backward avoiding the blood pooling beneath Cordell’s corpse. Blood cools quickly once it leaves the body and it drips from Cordell in thick drops, seeping into the cement beneath like syrup. The metallic odor of blood mingles with the fecund stench of voided bowels. The scent of Death’s bouquet is always the same Will thinks.

Hannibal holds his phone to his ear, clears his throat. “Buona sera. Signora Pazzi? Ah…bella. M… Mio dispiacio ch…chiamario am io sono della FBI…” Hannibal stutters in the worst Italian Will has heard. He shakes his head eyes glued to Hannibal’s face as he plays out his charade with Pazzi’s unsuspecting wife.

“Yes…I speak English. Thank you…*Special* Agent Price…yes I work with Jack Crawford.”

Hannibal lifts his head and looks to Will. The doleful blue eyes hold his for a moment before they close in resignation and Will crosses to the windows where he stands with his back to Hannibal. He takes his fingers to the glass panes, drawing circles in the grime as he listens to Hannibal play Special Agent Price of the FBI.

“I am so sorry to have to inform you of this,” Hannibal continues, “but your husband has been critically injured and taken to Ospedale Le Scotte…because that’s where he was injured…in Siena…I don’t know the details but someone from the FBI will meet you there… Yes…leave now. He is listed in critical condition and Signora Pazzi?”

Hannibal waits while the flustered Allegra breathes into the phone hanging on his every word, “His phone was stolen…yes…if the call is from him do not pick up…we’ll have to trace it when you….because this is an FBI matter. It is important that you don’t talk to anyone or call anyone and go straight there… You can’t call the hospital because he won’t be listed under his real name…I really can’t tell you more than that…you’re welcome…please drive safely…Bye.”

Hannibal clicks off his phone and tucks it back into his pocket. Signora Pazzi will be on the road for at least an hour driving to Siena and will be detained for hours by hospital security while the FBI is informed that the wife of a Polizia detective is insisting that her husband has been brought in injured and undercover to their hospital, sent by Price.

“Laying a trap?” Will says quietly from the window.

“Misdirection. Ambiguity."

"Preying on his fear.”

“What is his nature, Will? What do you see when you look out that window?”

All the impressions he has collected of Pazzi twist as they always do like clusters of vines within the darker recesses of his mind. Assuming Pazzi’s perspective is instantaneous and the parking lot below evaporates as he walks through the evening in Pazzi’s shoes. The window in his mind replaces the actual pane his fingers press against, the cool slippery glass a tactile tether that keeps him from drifting completely away.

“He’s still here.” Will says after a moment, “He won’t leave until we’re all dead. He’s watching and waiting for us to kill everyone else.” Will stares into the glass at Hannibal’s reflection watching his face shift with the shadows as he draws nearer.

Hannibal nods solemnly at the window, accepting Will’s estrangement for the moment, his need to maintain his distance. “He is armed. And he knows he has to kill both of us.”

“He’ll assume the worst. He exists in two worlds. His own, and the one he fabricates for her.”

“I imagine our detective has already passed a cover story to his superiors about his whereabouts.”

“Keeps Interpol and the FBI off his back. Jack knows what he’s up to and he’s not talking to Jack.”

“Jack is watching the board right now. He’s not playing.”

“Jack…will send in the clean-up crew. Pazzi’s on his own.”

“As are you.”

Hannibal pauses, as though Will needed reminding of Uncle Jack’s abandonment, leaving Will to his exclusion and darker impulses. Will’s face remains impassive in the window; he mentally left the FBI months ago, a reality Jack has not wanted to face; but, Jack wants Hannibal so badly, he is completely willing to sacrifice Will to get what he wants. This is a reality Will understands all too well.

“Jack suspects you are colluding with Du Maurier.” Will says from the window.

“I know. If he suspects that, he also suspects you and I are colluding.” Hannibal says.

“Jack suspects a lot of things but he’s not sure about anything. His primary motivation is apprehending you.”

“And Pazzi is motivated by two things. His reward and his trophy wife.”

“When he finds her gone he’ll assume you took her before coming here.” Will says taking a finger down the greasy glass.

“Or you.”

A grimace from Will. “Or both of us. He’ll call her, racked with guilt already blaming himself.”

“She’ll have been detained at the hospital by then.”

“The FBI will know Price didn’t call her. The FBI will call, maybe Jack. He may ignore it. If he picks up he’ll know she is with the FBI. But he won’t want to explain himself. He’ll lie. Come looking for us. He has to.”

Will turns from the streaked window to face Hannibal. The dark eyes peering into his confirm for Will Hannibal already suspects what Will feels without a doubt.

“He’s on the roof. That’s where I’d go if I had my Berretta. He’ll want a head shot, unobstructed.”

Hannibal merely nods. “In order to send Agamemnon where we want him to go, we’ll have to change the narrative to accommodate what the Fates have in store for him. A narrative Pazzi knows.”

The impulse to reach out and touch the blood stained shoulder is difficult to stifle, but he does. Will hangs a moment on his words; body tensed as though waiting for that touch to his shoulder, but the blue eyes blink and he leans back against the window allowing his shoulders to relax, raises a brow.

“You already placed the idea in his head by mentioning his ancestry.”

“History repeats itself. Pazzi will meet the Medici, again.”

“Not in the cathedral…”

“No. Palazzo Vecchio.”

“Of course. The Vasari Corridor. You can still get in?”

“We’ll find out.”

“Giuliano was killed if I recall.” Will says.

“Under the Duomo in the cathedral.” Hannibal says. “Giuliano was stabbed to death by Bernardo Barancelli and Francesco Pazzi. Francesco was hung out a window of the Palazzo Vecchio. Jacopo Pazzi was hung there later, buried, dug up, and dragged through the streets of Florence.”

“Barancelli escaped to Istanbul but the Sultan sent him back in chains to the Medici. They executed him in the Bargello.”

“I suppose you never got around to visiting Palazzo Vecchio or the Bargello?”

“No I didn’t. But I got close to the Palazzo Pitti.” Will scoffs, “And the Boboli Gardens.”

So delightfully infuriating his Will, but Hannibal ignores the little jibe. “Shame. I would have liked to have shown you Florence, Will.”

Will continues to lean against the window, chin angled up, defiantly silent as usual.

“He brought up the Medici at Boboli.” He says a moment later, thoughts recalibrated and unwanted information shoved aside with the intimate images Hannibal knows they invite, “Seemed a bit sensitive about the Medici on a couple of occasions.”

“I instilled a little subliminal fear perhaps. He’s been spoon fed my unique pathology, my apparent obsession with Dante and my penchant for *contrapasso.* A bit of his family history in my hands nourished latent insecurities."

"Not so latent." Will says quietly, almost under his breath. "He'll go to Palazzo Vecchio looking for her or for us."

"To keep his reward."

"The monkey's paw."

"No good deed goes unpunished. Speaking of which, Mason was on the menu anyway. Shall we?"

Hannibal heads for the exit. "Did you see him?" Hannibal says, taking the lead.

"Mason? Briefly. He's still waiting for Cordell."

"Well, let's not disappoint him."

Hannibal stands feet apart, chin high as Will presses the button to release the elevator door. It slides open revealing a wide eyed and wildly aware Mason. It seems more than an eternity ago that Will had stood facing Hannibal just like this in front of a drugged out Mason slicing off his face in Will's living room. Identical positions and Will feels the vertigo of chaos about to pitch them off the precipice again.

He glances up to find Hannibal waiting, eyes reflecting but a fraction of the violence simmering beneath the tattered jacket. The pain of his wound seems less an annoyance than the leather jacket that hangs in shreds from his shoulders. As he moves there is a subtle stiffness with which Hannibal holds himself beneath the jacket yet he comports himself in front of Mason as though about to take his seat at an opera house. Will's skin tugs tightly along his cheek, the blood is beginning to dry and he touches the wound flinching as he does and glances down at himself. He sees more red on his clothes than he sees actual fabric. Either of them would be arrested on the spot.

He focuses on Mason despite his inferno, its flames and forms still intrude upon his waking world. Even now, the red rimmed eyes of his infernal companion peer at him from the bottom of the stairs sending a fresh wave of prickling nettles along his skin.

Mason's face is shiny with drool without Cordell to wipe away the spittle that drips through his teeth like a sieve. He huffs through his open mouth, tongue and tissue enflamed like the rest of his ravaged face.

"You're not Cordell." He manages.

The blonde brows knit together in an angry pucker over the tortured pools of blue. Mason is cracked beyond repair, but cognizance has not left him yet. Hannibal detects a stubborn spark of awareness swimming in Mason's mad pools.

"Mason…" Hannibal says leaning over the wheelchair, "You missed the transition stuffed in the elevator. Fate has brought us together again."

"Where's Cordell? What…have you done with my…nurse?" Mason sucks air in shallow gasps.

"He's in the office." Hannibal retorts, "Would you like some oxygen, Mason?"

"What for? You're going to kill me, aren't you?" Mason is instantly suspicious.

“Not quite ready to part meat from bone just yet.” Hannibal says.

“Ha! My bone…or his?” The lipless mouth manages to sneer around gaping teeth.

“You’re already parted from your bone.” Will says dryly, actually causing Hannibal’s brows to rise.

“Your mouth is rough when you’re angry, Mr. Graham. Did my sister squeal when you used it on her?” Mason wheezes.

Hannibal watches Will’s fingers curl into fists at his sides, but he exhales slowly and the gleam of the predator burns behind the flinty blue he turns upon Mason.

“Pigs squeal, Mason. Let me get the door so you can hear them better.” Will opens the door to the office so Hannibal can push Mason through.

“You’re no fun. Must take a lot to get a rise out of you.”

Mason coughs a little weakened by the exchange with Graham. He rolls his eyes over to Lecter, dismissing the tiresome Graham. Lecter is much more engaging. As Mason had sat in the dark and musty elevator listening to the muffled symphony after Cordell had gone, he had conversed with Papa. And as Beethoven had faded with the shutting of the elevator doors so had the panic subsided slipping into the darkness with his father.

Lecter is understandably angry. Mason sent people to kill him. Who wouldn’t be angry? And Graham is always angry. But Lecter does not intend to kill him. Lecter must want something because for some reason Mason cannot fathom, Lecter has a soft spot for Margot. Perhaps because Graham does. Lecter plays a long game. He manipulated events and his patients in Baltimore. He manipulates Graham that much is clear. Pulls him around like an unbroken horse spitefully refusing the bit.

The Paolini may have an agreement with Lecter, but they will ransom Verger secrets before they disclose them. Lecter only thinks he knows who he is dealing with. Papa told him all about the Paolini. The only *famiglia* the Paolini care about is the Paolini.

Academic, Mason thinks. All of this is really about the elaborate game of chicken he plays with Graham. With everyone else out of the way, Lecter will present his new game. Mason just has to play along.

“Oxygen, Mason?” Hannibal asks again.

Mason narrows his eyes, “Going to fill me full of oxygen and burn me alive? That…might blow up in your face.”

“No need to roast what I don’t intend to eat. No oxygen then.” Hannibal says walking around the wheelchair and taking the handles in his hands.

“Where are you taking me?” Mason’s eyes are so glazed they appear as glass as he peers into Hannibal’s face waiting for his answer.

“Back to the slaughter pit, where else?” Hannibal answers smoothly.

“Back to the pit and the music. You think Fate waits for you there?” Mason drawls.

“Fate finds us all. How will you face yours?”

Will sighs deeply as he holds the door to the offices. Mason is but a buffoon, a vessel for contempt and ridicule. Hannibal pushes him through and they halt at the array of desks blocking their path.

“What…game are you and the sperm donor playing on me now?” Mason whines, sounding like the old Mason Will remembers.

It occurs to Will that Mason believes he is in no immediate danger because of his father’s will leaving his entire estate to Mason and only Mason. Mason has been left with the impression neither Hannibal nor Will would jeopardize Margot’s well-being. The truth is, Margot benefitted largely because killing Mason would have been inconvenient. Neither of them could have snared the other without incriminating themselves. Hannibal had brought Mason to Will’s house to ensure that though Will suspects he had welcomed the opportunity to continue Will’s therapy as well.

Will had not had to kill Mason to know that he would have enjoyed the killing immensely. By cutting Hannibal down in the barn to save himself he had learned something about himself. He no longer wanted to kill Hannibal. The dreams of killing him ceased to torment him and the waking fantasies of killing him had given way to other fantasies.

Will is curious how Hannibal intends to get around the will if that even matters at this point. Hannibal was always rooting for Margot to win the deadly game he set them upon. Will doubts Hannibal would hold Mason’s death sentence in abeyance. Hannibal has his own circles of hell and Mason only needs to be breathing in order to meet the conditions of the will. Essentially dead, but not legally dead.

Will imagines Mason hanging over his hogs, body impaled on one of the hooks meant for them, his oxygen mask taped to his face as he watches his dismembered limbs tossed one by one into the pit…

He sighs in front of the desks Cordell had moved and turns around to find Hannibal waiting behind him. He looks to Will and then to the maze of desks. Will looks down at his bare feet and lifts his eyes again to Hannibal. Hannibal stares back at him wide eyed, a plaintive patient expression on his infuriatingly mischievous face. Rather than waste time exchanging barbs with him, Will huffs out a breath of resignation and begins shoving the desks out of the way one by one while Hannibal waits. As the muscles in his shoulders tense with the effort, Will remembers Hannibal’s tattered Jacket. Of course, Will grunts, Hannibal’s pride does not extend to allowing Mason to perceive any weakness.

Hannibal watches Will clear the obstacle course away sighing audibly as he does so Hannibal can hear and he sucks on his lower lip in that petulant way he has. Will just killed a man twice his size. He can hardly complain about moving a bit of furniture. While Hannibal waits for Will he also waits for Mason to notice Cordell’s mutilated corpse on the floor to his left.

His patience is soon rewarded as inarticulate murmurs erupt from the spikey blonde head.

“What’s that, Mason?” Hannibal prompts.

“Cuh…Cuh…Cordell…you killed him.”

“Oh, no, no, no. Will killed him.”

Cordell lays belly up, shirt drenched in blood from collar to untucked hem at the bottom and trousers soiled and stained between his legs. Hannibal imagines Mason's eyes are fixed upon the throat laid wide open and the empty fluid filled eye sockets. Mason's tongue clucks wildly as he groans.

"Mis…ter…Gray…ham! I'm going to feed you to my pigs, for that…have I said that already?"

"Yes, Mason. Don't trouble yourself over it." Hannibal looks to Will.

Will stands in the middle of the office suite shaking his head from side to side. He resumes shoving the last desk out of their path to the pit. Beethoven's *Fifth* continues to play over the speakers, the second movement now, and the pigs are indeed squealing and grunting as Will holds the door leading to the pit. Hannibal rolls the wheelchair through the office door wheeling him right up to the railing so he can see his pigs and the carcasses of the Casaletto brothers. Their bodies have been torn apart, shreds of sinew trailing from slick white bones lay discarded on the blood stained hay.

"Who was that?" Mason looks up at Hannibal.

"Casaletto boys. Hard to tell which is which."

"Mama Casaletto wouldn't recognize them. Where's Pazzi?"

"Run off with his reward. Which bank did you deposit his thirty pieces of silver in?"

Mason considers this. Pazzi left with his party favors without saying goodbye. Impossible not take that kind of snub personally.

"Why not? Deutsch Bank downtown Florence. Going to wait outside and take my money? Add it to your portfolio?"

"I don't want your money Mason. I have a very lucrative arrangement with the Paolini. They are in a position to buy out their interest, but they prefer to hold their shares in Verger Meatpacking and expand their interests in Verger enterprises. With a silent partner, of course."

"You're trying for controlling interest in *my* company?"

"Nothing so small. This is about legacy, Mason."

Will turns from the wheezing Mason to check Hannibal's expression. Hannibal flicks his eyes to Will and raises a reassuring brow.

Mason coughs. "What…do you think you negotiated? There is no legacy or Verger Enterprises if I'm dead. The entire estate goes to…"

"Only if you have no heir, Mason."

"There is no heir. I saw to that. The Paolini have played you, Doctor Lecter and you think yourself so smart. Bluffing is part of negotiation and you were out bluffed. The Verger line is tucked in my pants. When the time is right, maybe I'll send you a birth announcement."

"Who's bluffing now?" Hannibal intones over Mason's head.

Mason's eyes float nervously to the pigs and up to Hannibal's face. "What…did they tell you?"

“Me? Nothing. A third party negotiated the arrangement. Papa Paolini made some comments that gave my agent pause and she relayed them to me.”

“She?” Will asks, “Your relative in France?”

“Yes. The Paolini twins found her and some sensitive information, some they were able to relay to you but I have the bulk of it now.”

“What did she say?”

“What relative?” Mason says.

Hannibal ignores him and continues to look into the engaging blue eyes before him. “Essentially the Paolini could have taken the original negotiated offer to sever their business ties, but decided to continue as partners, instead.”

“You negotiated this entire evening.” Will says.

“I negotiated an alternate possible outcome. Mason was going forward with his plans regardless. Elario’s phone call was beyond me.”

“You tried to buy me out? Out of my own company?” Mason whines, voice creeping up an octave.

“Quiet, Mason. You’re interrupting.” Hannibal warns with clipped curtness.

“The Paolini knew you would kill Mason if they kept the agreement?” Will says.

“Yes.”

“Why would they do that, knowing you intended to kill Mason?”

“Why indeed. The senior Paolini referred to Margot as the Verger heiress.”

“Paolini and your relative conducted this arrangement personally?”

“Face to face. She is an astute judge of character.”

“I’ll bet she is…”

“Ha! You left a woman to negotiate with the Paolini?” Mason sputters derisively, “Her lady parts inferred what the Paolini wanted her to. They played us both, Doctor Lecter.”

“You don’t know pigs as well as you think. Or people. Females can be particularly ruthless. In my family…and yours.”

“Margot’s ruthlessness was surgically removed. If you kill me, Margot…gets nothing. And neither do you. The Paolini walk away with whatever scraps they culled from the negotiating table.”

“Transitions and Fate, Mason. Where did you hide the surrogate? Tuscany. Or… Sardinia, perhaps?”

Mason chomps his teeth and his tongue clicks clinging to the roof of his mouth like sticky sand paper. Pupils dilate as the wide blue eyes roll between Hannibal and Will. Hannibal looks to the silent slender form beside him holding a fist to scarlet stained lips. Understanding blooms across Will's face etching long sad creases around the expressive mouth. A sigh of exasperation escapes as he stands frozen in place associations whizzing around his skull.

"You knew?" Will asks with only a trace of accusation to taint his softly spoken inquiry.

Will turns glistening pale blue eyes on Hannibal, lashes already wet painted with the pain and anger brimming from deep within. Hannibal knows Will's emotions are compounded by the sorrow he likely imagines as he invariably steps inside Margot's mind. He shudders as his body absorbs what he cannot control. His empathy is so complete that he cannot separate himself from his imagination. It is during these moments of utter helplessness that Will is most vulnerable and most beautiful. The last time Hannibal had witnessed Will's gift like this had been in his kitchen…

"I suspected. I don't know for certain." Hannibal responds just as softly, "But I would trust my source and my instincts before I would trust Mason."

Will is fully aware of Hannibal's hand in all this and the opportunity for more of the same is as boundless as the sea of regret Will already floats upon. The implications this twist of Fate portents are mind boggling and Will shoves the thoughts away into the dark trunk in his mind to unpack later.

"You aren't the Paolini's silent partner…you're Margot's."

"As are you."

Will nods, lips grim and flat. He turns back to Mason inspiration sufficiently cultivated Hannibal thinks.

"You…ripped her apart and…stole it?" It's not really a question and Will does not wait for an answer.

In the blink of an eye Will's fingers are curled around the sequined lapels of Mason's tuxedo jacket, nose and tangled mane of curls brush over Mason's contorted face. He is a predator sniffing his prey and Will appears as dangerous as Hannibal as ever seen him.

He must certainly appear that way to Mason. Mason stares up at Will too stunned to speak all color drained from his face. The tendons in his jaw twitch from side to side, mouth gurgling with saliva that runs down his chin.

Will presses in close so he is nose to nose with Mason, fumes of the rotting body wrapped in the tacky suit waft from the gaping maw to fill his nostrils. The child must be male or else Mason wouldn't be so desperate to conceal its existence. He will torture Margot with promises of a reunion and never keep those promises. And what would Mason do with a child born of a sister he despises and a man he intended to kill?

What do you want from me?

Nothing or as much as you'd like to give.

As much as I would like to give?

I always thought men were an optional extra in childrearing, so I'm not opposed to a male influence. As long as it's not my brother. He's not good with children.

“Where is he?” Will’s fingers contract around the fabric intending to haul him over to the railing.

Mason spits into Will’s face suddenly, “Let…go of me…” Mason wheezes, helpless to do anything else. “No baby for you…Mr. Graham. Doctor…Lecter is…telling tales…”

Enough, Will thinks.

Will yanks the frail body from the wheelchair, drags the limp mass of deteriorating flesh and bone across the cement. He slams Mason into the railing, splintering bone along his back. Mason whines softly as he hangs unnaturally over the railing like a dishtowel. Tendons and jaw wriggle as he looks upside down into the pit, body convulsing in Will’s hands because he cannot breathe. Will pulls him upright, flips him over. Mason can’t feel the metal scraping against his ribs, but he can suck at air until his lungs collapse, succumbing to the pressure that presses from without. Will grabs a handful of blonde hair and tugs Mason’s head up. His pigs will be the last thing he sees.

“Where…”

“Will…” Hannibal’s hands come from behind to settle over his. The sheer brutality of what Mason has done is almost overwhelming and Will can imagine it all. The impulse to smash Mason’s head against the railing repeatedly is so compelling and Will wants to experience the euphoric satisfaction that comes with the release of the creature coiled inside. Mason’s venomous spite fills him up and he wants to unleash it back on Mason and would were it not for the touch of Hannibal’s hands.

“What…” Will hisses.

“Doesn’t matter where. My instincts tell me the Paolini will eventually contact Margot. I think when news of his deserved demise surfaces in whatever form it takes in the tabloids - after the FBI clean it up - Margot will be on a plane to claim her child and her inheritance. What do your instincts tell you?”

“That…we don’t need to talk to this…waste of blood and breath anymore.”

Without ceremony or hesitation, Will bends down and wraps a hand around Mason’s leg just above the knee and grabs the ankle with the other. He looks to Hannibal, his intentions clear. Hannibal grasps Mason’s legs in a similar fashion and looks at Will over the rumpled pant legs.

“Seems anticlimactic.”

“I know you enjoy theatricallity…”

“You don’t want to…”

“No. He’s had enough attention already.”

“More than enough.” Hannibal agrees.

Together they heave Mason over the railing coattails flapping like a banner as he bounces off the backs of the waiting pigs to sink into the sea of snouts and hooves and piles of crimson stained hay.

Beethoven continues to roll from the speakers as they watch the pigs tug the remaining flesh from Mason's face and nuzzle impatiently at the tuxedo and trousers. Will leans on his elbows as he gazes over the rail allowing the enjoyment of the moment to wash over him, allowing himself to simply be in the moment. He feels Hannibal's gaze, it lingers over him like a caress and this pleasure too he allows.

"He didn't make a sound." Hannibal says after a moment.

"Disappointed?"

Hannibal longs to reach out his hand to take a handful of bloody curls into his fist and pull Will close but he massages his sore shoulder instead.

"Managing expectations. You never fail to surprise me." Hannibal has to look at the damp ruffled curls since Will insists on depriving Hannibal the pleasure of gazing into his face.

"Pigs are having a tough time." Will says, "Maybe we should have unwrapped him."

"The joy of giving is largely about watching the gift being opened, isn't it?"

Will sighs tiredly and offers a wrinkle of a smile. Achilles and Patroclus cannot remove their armor just yet. He turns away from the grisly scene below, their immediate problem scoring a fresh scowl upon cheeks already smarting from Cordell's scalpel.

"Thoughts on dealing with Agamemnon? We can't leave the building unless we know where he is."

Hannibal looks to Mason's wheelchair; specifically he looks to the oxygen tank.

"Or unless he is otherwise occupied." Hannibal says.

Will considers the tank. It's not an especially large tank but it is filled with one hundred percent oxygen. Oxygen accounts for only twenty percent of the atmosphere. A fire fed by pure oxygen blazes fast and hot. Will doubts exploding the tank would start a fire and he has no weapon to fire on it anyway, but releasing the tank's contents into a smaller room and igniting a fire would provide a spectacular diversion and cause Pazzi to flee the building.

"It's doable." Will says, pushing away from the railing. "What resources do we have?"

"Must be something Mason left on the coffee table or in the attaché."

Hannibal starts toward the table with Will in tow. Both of them quickly peruse the table covered with shards of shiny crystal from broken champagne glasses that sparkle like the tiny pools of melted ice. The attaché sits beside the table where Mason had left it. Hannibal clears away a space with his arm and sets it on the table.

"It's likely locked." Will says, "I guess we should leave the music as it is."

Hannibal fiddles with the lock on the attaché and abandons it figuring the Cordell or Mason has the key.

"Better not to alert him. He is relying on sound right now. Doubtful he can see us."

Will nods at the pit. "Think he heard that?"

“The rapturous feeding frenzy? Perhaps.”

“He may be in the air ducts like you were.”

“Possibly, but only if access is on the roof. He’ll want an easy escape route. It’s not easy moving in those ducts.”

“We have to have some distance. The fire will erupt instantaneously.” Will says, sifting through the items on the coffee table and finding nothing useful. “It’s not like we can drop a match and run.”

“No…but…” Hannibal pauses as his eyes alight on something they can use.

“But…what?”

Will looks up from the table to find Hannibal dangling a set of keys in his hand.

“The SUV?”

“Gasoline.”

“A ready made bomb. You want to drive it into the slaughter house?”

“That would be insane.” Hannibal quips, “Sending it into the building already on fire would work.”

“That’s…only marginally less insane. We would need to prop something on the gas pedal and release the brake.”

“Like a leg.”

“Whose leg?”

“Cordell has two.”

“So he does.” Will sighs, “Which room gets the oxygen? Office is on the second floor and it’s too large. Stairwell is protected by concrete the SUV won’t crash through. What’s downstairs?”

“Right above the basement is a bathroom, part of later renovations. Standard wood construction, no cinder blocks.”

“A bathroom?” Will groans, images of exploding sink, toilet and heavy sharp plumbing fixtures fill his mind, “We’ll have to shut the water off just in case, but the fire will burn too hot for water to put it out.”

“Water will boil and evaporate.”

“Not before it sends everything in the bathroom flying.”

“As you said, we’ll require some distance.”

“A lot of distance. And we will be moving targets once we leave the building.”

“We’ve already opened the door to Fate.”

“And we continue to wrestle with it vacillating between despair and hope.”

Will looks to the ceiling as the third movement pounds from the speakers, the sound bouncing off walls already engulfed in flames. Will finds it oddly appropriate that soon fire will be climbing the walls quite literally.

“Defeat or acceptance. Are we surrendering to Fate or are we conquering it, Will?”

Hannibal reaches into the melting bucket of ice and pulls out two bottles of water, extends a freezing cold bottle to Will. Will snatches it with a nod, cracks it open, but does not drink.

“I guess we’ll find out. To Fate then…and all its consequences.” Will says.

Will salutes Hannibal with his plastic bottle and waits. Hannibal tilts his bottle, pauses catching Will’s eyes before he brings the bottle to his lips.

“To Fate.” Hannibal says. He lifts the bottle and drinks as he watches Will guzzle down his water.

Oxygen tank successfully emptied into the slaughter house bathroom and water dutifully shut off, Hannibal leaves the building moving cautiously across the darkened lot to join Will at the SUV. It had been Will’s job to carry Cordell’s leg and the necessary supplies from the basement to the vehicle and rig their flaming chariot.

As he approaches the vehicle he takes the bottle of champagne he had grabbed from the ice bucket on his way out from inside his jacket. The door is open and all the windows are down. He crouches next to the black SUV eyes on the slaughter house while Will wrestles with Fate inside the vehicle.

“How much longer?” he asks setting the champagne on the pavement.

“The fu…the leg keeps slipping off the gas pedal and…” Will mutters his usual profanities amidst frustrated grunts. “There…got it.”

Will slides out of the seat to join Hannibal on the pavement. He is covered in blood up to his elbows, flecks of dried blood and smears of the fresher variety cling to his face. He begins to wipe his sleeve to clear some of it away, but after glancing at his drenched arms thinks better of it.

Unable to help himself, Hannibal swipes a finger alongside Will’s nose. Will predictably pulls away and rubs his arms against his trousers, an avoidance tactic and largely futile besides.

“What are you doing?” Will whispers noticing the champagne.

Hannibal shoves his hand into his pocket and covers the cork with his jacket. “Champagne Cristal” he says, turning the cork through his jacket until the cork gives with a muffled pop. “Ah…there she goes. You need to relax with yourself.”

Will stares unsure what he is feeling as Hannibal takes a healthy swig.

“Will…” Hannibal offers the bottle to him and when Will doesn’t reach for it, thrusts the bottle into Will’s hand. “Some of the finest champagne in the world shouldn’t go to waste. At least seventeen thousand a bottle.”

“We don’t have time for this…”

“Of course we do. Have some before I clean my shoulder and wipe your face with it.” Hannibal continues to press the bottle into Will’s hands.

Chuckling softly at the insanity Will wipes his mouth, the taste of gasoline still affronting his lips after syphoning a water bottle full of it from the tank. He takes the bottle to his lips and lets the champagne flow flinching in surprise at the slight acidic burn that accompanies the crystalline burst on his tongue. He thinks he just swallowed several hundred dollars of bliss. Hannibal pulls the jacket from his shoulder and proceeds to douse the deep cut that extends from the fleshy top down his back gritting his teeth with the sting.

He quickly pulls the shirt and jacket back up and reaches in another pocket to retrieve one of Mason’s terry towels.

“Now you.” The tone is insistent.

Will sighs but maintains his composure while Hannibal pours champagne over his head. Will closes his eyes and feels the soft terry dabbing at his face, his skin prickling with the touch. Hannibal spills the remaining champagne onto the towel and presses it to the side of Will’s face. Will grimaces at the burning sensation as the alcohol cleanses the wound.

Hannibal sets the empty bottle down to scrutinize Will’s face. Will clears his throat in warning. Satisfied, Hannibal rocks back on his heels watching Will move his jaw around while he collects his thoughts and recovers from the intrusion.

“Timing is crucial.” Will whispers.

“Always is.”

“I’ll start the ignition, rev it up in neutral. I won’t release the brake until you have started the fire in the back seat. Where did you find a lighter?”

“Cordell’s pockets. He’s a veritable packrat of sundries Mason might need.”

“I don’t even want to know…” Will says looking up to scan the roof of the slaughter house. “If he’s up there, he’s been watching.”

“I know. Since he hasn’t taken a shot we may have avoided his detection.”

Will shrugs. “When I was dragging Cordell’s leg and the hoses from the basement out here he definitely had his chance.”

“We may still have the element of surprise.” Hannibal says.

“I’m ready when you are.” Will says.

“Aren’t you always?” Hannibal taunts, gazing into the shiny champagne streaked face.

Frowning, Will turns his head but not before Hannibal catches the determined gleam in the pale blue eyes. Allowing Will to sit in the driver’s seat while the SUV erupts in flames is truly a test of trust.

“Are we defeating or accepting Fate? Your inferno beckons.”

Will lowers his head, stares at the pavement. Honesty is so difficult between them. “I’ve no desire to be consumed by its fire, Hannibal. I won’t escape it by feeding it.”

“Rather we come outside from there and see the stars?”

Hannibal’s hand hovers over Will’s bowed head like a halo, the scent of him maddeningly warm and sweet. So infuriating this defiant achingly beautiful creature that squats beside him.

“The stars that marked our beginning have fallen away.”

Will’s words fall to the ground, quiet plaintive notes that strike at Hannibal’s heart. His fingers float just above the crown of tousled curls a moment longer. The symphony they write becomes ever more harmonious.

“We must go deeper into greater pain?” Hannibal continues with Dante’s verse.

Will sighs and shifts his weight. Hannibal drops his hand, resting it on his tender thigh that throbs from the Casaletto boy’s blade.

“It is not permitted that we stay.” Will rises from his crouch to climb into the cab of the SUV.

“Our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.” Hannibal says climbing into the backseat of their chariot.

Pazzi’s head snaps around at the sound of the engine from the lot below. He crouches in the darkness atop the roof of the slaughter house and makes his way to the perimeter of the flat roof, scuffing his way along its weather beaten surface.

He had climbed up through the ductwork onto the roof, kicking the leaf littered screen loose from its screws and dragging himself out. After assuring himself that the Paolini had departed, he stood up to listen to the human shrieks and porcine grunts from the pit. There had been quiet afterward, except for the unremitting repeat of the symphony Pazzi hopes he will never hear again. Although the slaughter house is lined with gigantic windows they are useless from his vantage point above. Fortunately, some of the windows are broken and the mayhem Lecter and Graham had unleashed had not been insulated.

He suspects Verger is among the dead, either strung up in a Renaissance parody or splayed on the bottom of the pit, feeding his pigs. As he looks down upon the lot he spots the SUV, engine running and headlights dark but the exhaust billowing into the night is clearly coming from it.

He raises his Berretta and aims at the windshield wondering who is at the wheel. He hesitates, thinking it strange they haven’t pulled out in a squeal of rubber. He jumps in surprise as the beam of the headlights suddenly splits the darkness and the SUV accelerates and veers toward the end of the building right beneath where he stands. He’s not certain but he thinks he sees two shadows tumble from the car. He aims his gun prepared to take his shot when the SUV bursts into flames.

Pazzi drops his arm and begins to run.

The SUV explodes on impact and the resulting explosion rocks the old slaughter house to its foundations.

Pazzi halts in his tracks. Shock waves. The roof vibrates with the impact as the car explodes taking part of the building with it. Flaming debris flies everywhere. Pazzi almost falls over the side with the explosion. He stumbles along the roof without thinking as flames rapidly consume the damaged roof behind him.

As he reaches the other side of the roof, he searches frantically for the fire escape he saw earlier, its wrought iron ladder is his only means of climbing down in time to avoid the ravenous flames that follow. He is certain they emptied Verger's oxygen tank somewhere within the building before sending in the SUV. There is no other explanation for the explosion. Finally locating the ladder, he scrambles onto it and shimmies down it, cursing as his feet slip along the rungs in his haste to reach the bottom. He forces himself to take a breath before he finds himself falling to his death.

The parking lot is lit up by the blaze and Pazzi looks out over the pavement and twisted fences. He sees movement to his right along the line of trees at the entrance. He smiles as he raises his Berretta. Two figures move like shadows over the gravel heading out from the main gate. An easy shot to hit one, but not both. He doesn't need to shoot both, not right away.

Wound one and the other will stop to assist. Pazzi can take the other out while in pursuit. His finger twitches on the trigger. As Pazzi takes aim one figure slows to glance back and as he pulls the trigger and fires the figure pushes the other to the ground. He fires off a second round and thinks at least one bullet found its mark. Pazzi hangs on the ladder long enough to watch the shadowy figure fall to the ground.

"Gotcha!"

Pazzi leaps from the ladder. By the time Pazzi has dropped to the ground and looked up again, the shadows are gone. *No…* He runs to the edge of the service road for a better view. His eyes frantically scan the area where the shadows dropped. No movement. No sound but for the blaze of the fire behind him.

"Fottermi!"

Pazzi grits his teeth and fires into the darkness, random shots along the ground and a few more at eye level. Nothing. Even with a fresh magazine, Pazzi is loath to breach the darkness and leave the safety of the light from the blazing building.

He turns and runs to the Cadillac. Debris covers the hood and the windshield is cracked. The vehicle will become a flaming casualty if he does not move it soon. He flings open the door and slides along the slippery leather, hand already reaching toward the glove compartment. He flips it and grabs the spare keys. He switches on the ignition and slams the car into reverse, backing it away from the smoke and roaring flames.

He taps his fingers along the steering wheel as his thoughts jump around his head. He laughs suddenly when he realizes he doesn't hear the symphony anymore. The fire has swallowed or melted the sound system. He does hear the squall of screaming pigs from inside the slaughter house. Lecter and Graham have made themselves a barbeque.

Let them burn. Let them all burn…

Tires squeal as Pazzi peels out of the parking lot leaving Lecter, Graham, and their barbeque behind. He has suitcases to pack and the lovely Allegra waits for him at home. He takes out his phone and scrolls through the calls and messages. Crawford again, and two calls from the precinct.

He can call the precinct. After all, he is providing security for *Signore* Graham in Fiesole. And all is quiet.

Doctor Clayton can't do much. Good luck to him calling the Polizia for help looking for Graham. His only recourse is to call Crawford and Crawford will not lift a finger. He won't even call Interpol though he would be obliged to do so. He wants Lecter and by his own admission has given Graham all the latitude he wants. Clayton might call D'Angelo, but neither of them poses much of a threat.

Pazzi turns on to the main road and heads back to Florence under a starry and moonlit sky. Lecter and Graham will be hours behind him. If they follow him at all. Someone will call the fire department. Eventually, Jack Crawford and the FBI will be crawling over the smouldering remains of the slaughter house. Lecter is already on the run and Graham may or may not return to Fiesole. If they are still alive.

He takes out his cigarettes, lights one and takes a long drag from it pressing his back against the seat. Once Deutsche Bank opens tomorrow morning he can carry out a very nice severance package and this entire sordid mess will all go away.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 80
Hannibal and Will are quoting passages from Dante's Inferno.
From there we came outside and saw the stars. Canto XXVI
But the stars that marked our starting fall away.
We must go deeper into greater pain,
for it is not permitted that we stay. Canto XXXIV
Do not be afraid; our fate
Cannot be taken from us; it is a gift. Canto VII

Also: Soooo sorry for the wait between chapters. Winding down though. Up next - Tending wounds. Jack gets an anonymous tip about Lounds. And Daniel's involvement becomes ever more convoluted.

Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Troy burns while Hannibal and Will tend to their wounds, old and new. Will hallucinates and Daniel engages in a little introspection. Jack checks out the carnage at the slaughter house.

No… Will spits out grass in the dark field and he looks to the blazing horizon in time to see Hannibal wobble on unsteady legs.

Just as Will is about to yell at him to get down, the silhouette staggers then falls flat perhaps ten feet from him. He glances back at the slaughter house to the undamaged end of the building where he spots Pazzi hugging a ladder preparing to drop and aiming his gun directly at them.

“Roll down the hill....he’s going to fire again!”

No response.

“Hannibal…”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 81

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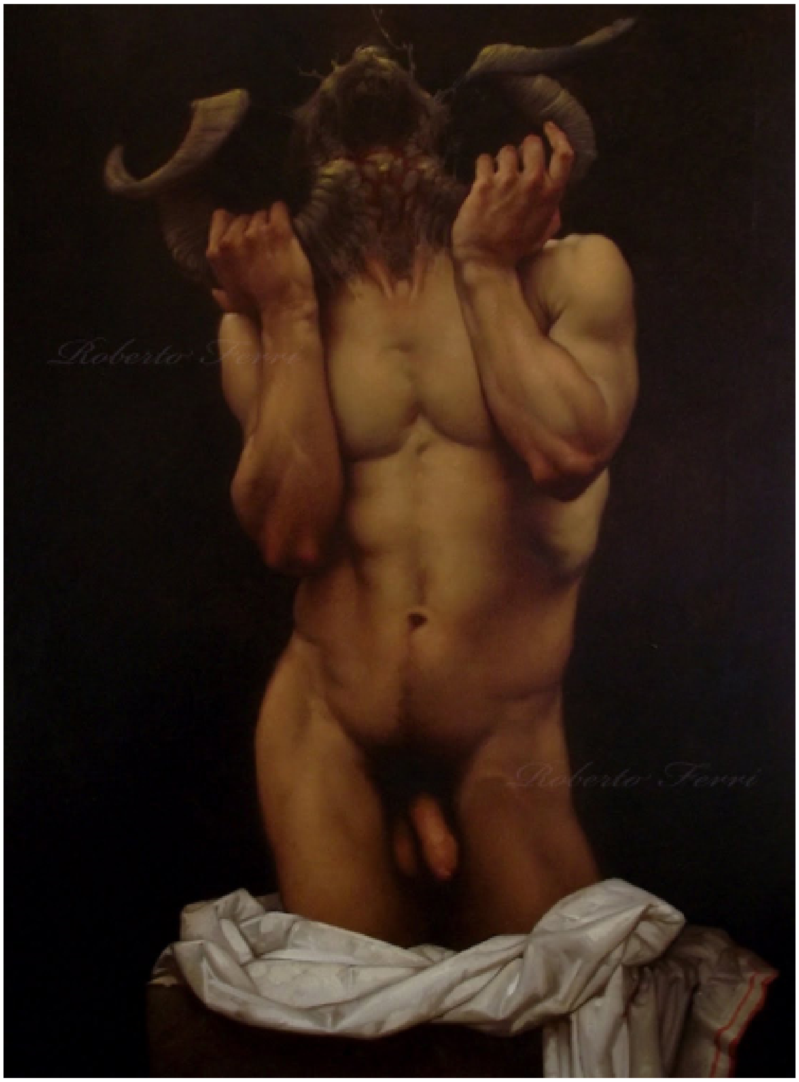
Jack checks out the carnage at the slaughter house.



Desirae, Roberto Ferri

I have just swallowed a terrific mouthful of poison. - Blessed, blessed, blessed the advice I was given! - My guts are on fire. The power of the poison twists my arms and legs, cripples me, drives me to the ground. I die of thirst, I suffocate, I cannot cry. This is Hell, eternal torment! See how the flames rise! I burn as I ought to. Go on, Devil!

Night in Hell, Authur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell, 1873*

The slaughter house blazes at Hannibal's back as he runs, rather limps beside Will, though he imagines Will is not faring much better as they make their way across the gravely parking lot. Will mutters his favorite profanity intermittently under his breath as his unprotected feet strike against the sharp unyielding pebbles.

The fire casts an eerie haze about the abandoned property as they run; soot and ash fly through the air filling the nostrils, so much so that Will runs with one hand over his mouth coughing. Hannibal coughs out flecks too as he passes the main gate and into the field feet pounding hard against the equally hard earth, finally exchanging gravel for grass and trading debris tainted air for the faint scent of pine. The pounding jolts muscles and tissue, shirt and trousers damp with the blood that seeps again from the agitated wounds. The tumble from the accelerating SUV did not help.

Pain is physical and psychological. Physical pain is perceived by the brain through a process. A stimulus sends a message to the central nervous system and the message is instantaneously received. The rest is a matter of perception. Thoughts, emotions, and one's own unique circuitry take over. Fear is often more debilitating than the wound, the sight of blood triggering a highly subjective response in each individual.

Blood is not particularly fear inducing for Hannibal; however, his surgeon's wisdom prevails and getting to the Ducati is paramount before the loss of blood becomes critical. Anticipating the possibility of medical intervention, Hannibal had planned accordingly. The knapsack includes a medical bag among other necessities, like Will's phone. Will's number is likely the only one Clayton…Daniel he reminds himself, will pick up with a minimum of trepidation. A call from Luciano's phone would suggest his worst fears had been realized and Hannibal has no desire to unduly upset him. He did tell Daniel that Hector would see Patroclus again.

Daniel is likely pacing his floors with his dogs in tow definitely agitated and possibly medicated. Perhaps with alcohol; the Chianti from dinner chased with the single malt scotch he apparently tosses down with Will. Perhaps something less conventional. Young Doctor Clayton keeps an interesting assortment of organic recreational substances in addition to the kind he is, at least for the moment, licensed to prescribe. He evidently sent Will on a very interesting trip, a trip from which Will has yet to fully return.

Daniel and his medical bag are a necessity given that a trip to the nearest emergency room is out of the question. Hannibal suspects their wounds will require more than a little triage before they can pursue Pazzi.

Hannibal glances back every now and again looking for something, anything, to indicate Pazzi's presence. But for the roaring flames and the few pigs that have managed to emerge from the passage to the corral outside there is no sign of him. The Cadillac remains in the lot a short distance from the front of the building as yet unaffected by the fire.

"I parked…at the top…of the next hill." Hannibal huffs glancing sideways to see Will keeping pace beside him, turning slightly to favor Hannibal with a blaze of blue beneath a crown of tousled curls.

"Parked…what?" Will grumbles craning his neck to look back.

He sees only the smoke and fire of his dreams billowing from the slaughter house and he turns back to the darkness ahead. The trees Will knows lie ahead of them are black shadows, vague shapes that hug the horizon and obscure the scattering of stars hanging in the night. He grits his teeth as he runs, trampling a trail of withered blades through the knee high grass he looks again over his shoulder scanning the roof for Pazzi, annoyed with the uncertainty.

The ground shifts and his body lurches to compensate for the movement but with every step the ground gives beneath his feet and Will no longer feels parched grass beneath his heels or slender blades caught between his toes but sand…

Leather lacings cling to sticky calves as his sandals sink into wet sand. The surf chases him along the deserted shore. Young Hannibal runs beside him, cuirass glittering and brilliant against his alabaster skin, a flashing of gold that rivals the sunlight. Will grips the bejeweled hilt of his short sword tightly; its blade stained like Hannibal's edged with bright crimson. Hannibal's arms are streaked with red, as are his cuirass and bare legs smeared with a glossing of sweat and spilled blood.

Grasping his helmet as he runs, he rips it from his head so the blonde braids bounce along his shoulders and he throws it to the waves laughing. He turns to Will, face flush and eyes bright.

Troy lies in ruins all around; 'tis not our blood that stains the ground. Young Hannibal's teeth gleam white as he lifts his head to the wind and smiles.

Will looks back at the discarded helmet rolling in the surf, shakes his head and peers at the haughty visage through the rims of burnished gold around his eyes.

Our ashes may yet entwine despite the ruin we leave behind. Will rasps through the sweaty mask.

He recalls the taste of flesh and rhyme from the last time his dreams sent him here. His feet fly over the shore skimming foam and kicking sea swept sand reveling in the sensations and feeling so… alive. And yet foreboding taints the moment, a sense of impending chaos persists like a cloak he cannot wrest from his wearied shoulders.

The Fates may yet suppress our breath; we are not free from the hand of death. Will huffs through the mouth of the golden mask, breathless, excited.

A contemptuous grunt slips through the smiling lips and Hannibal veers over so he collides with Will in a playful shove and the shining eyes leave no doubt he expects a shove in return, that and the removal of Will's helmet.

To Fate and all its consequences, you said. Brash words uttered with confidence not dread.

Hannibal laughs, lifting stained sword to the heavens, defiance shining in his eyes. His voice rings clear upon the wind while he waves his weapon tauntingly at the cloudless sky.

Is Troy not fallen already, our enemies lie slain? You rashly tempt the Fates with demonstrations of disdain. Will says brushing his hand across Hannibal's naked skin, tempting fate of another kind.

Hannibal rolls his armor clad shoulder a mock bristling at the tender touch, insistently nudging Will sideways across the sand.

Then...before the melancholy shades shower us with despair, Hannibal tugs at the leather strap beneath Will's jaw, *would that I once more delight in thy countenance most fair. What fearful frown dost thou hide from me? Cast it off with your helmet into the wailing sea.*

Will shakes his head at young Hannibal who drops his arm to slip his bloody blade into its sheath, lips peeled in a deadly smile. Still running, he turns toward the bracing ocean wind.

One loathsome swine escaped the slaughter his hide left undefiled…Will!

The rhythmic roll of the receding surf is pierced by Hannibal's surprised cries. Will is shoved to the ground and he looks up to see a spear fly straight into Hannibal, its razor tip striking the unprotected shoulder between breastplate and throat. He staggers, sinking to one knee and then the other as blood tinged hands grip the slippery spear extending from his shoulder.

Hannibal…

Gunshots echo from the dunes…

No… Will spits out grass in the dark field and he looks to the blazing horizon in time to see Hannibal wobble on unsteady legs.

Just as Will is about to yell at him to get down, the silhouette staggers then falls flat perhaps ten feet from him. He glances back at the slaughter house to the undamaged end of the building where he spots Pazzi hugging a ladder preparing to drop and aiming his gun directly at them.

"Roll down the hill....he's going to fire again!"

No response.

"Hannibal…"

Confusion. Stunned confusion for the blink of an eye. A heartbeat. Another blink. Will…is talking to him. To his left. He remembers the glint of metal at the ladder…weapon leveled at him, but Pazzi changes his mind, switches targets…The tenderness in his shoulder, a bolt of agonizing pain…the pain shoots right down his arm. *Down. Roll down.*

Another gunshot.

Will shoves off from the twisted blades of grass propelling his body down the slope hoping Pazzi can't discern the dip in the terrain. He hears grunting. Hannibal moves somewhere above him. Another second passes and another, finally Hannibal is rolling as well as more shots ring out. For a brief eternity the air is riddled with bullets and then silence.

Will does not move though every nerve seems to flinch in readiness, his instinct is to remain completely still and flat upon the ground. Pazzi will either pursue or flee. He waits listening to crickets chirping, straining to hear a rasp of breath from Hannibal. He thinks he hears an engine turn over; the distinct roar of eight cylinders fills the lot. Rubber squeals as Will imagines Pazzi slamming the car into reverse, brakes screeching as he manages the three point turn required to flee the lot. Will cautiously raises his head then torso from the ground to see the tail lights of the Cadillac sail past the main gates to spin gravel along the road. Flocks of ravens fly from the windows a black swarm of wings streak across the smoke filled umber sky.

He crawls toward the shadow that shifts along the ground as he watches Hannibal stubbornly struggle to sit upright. Hannibal clutches his left shoulder breathing hard through his mouth as yet unaware of Will. He looks around as he breathes; dark eyes assimilating every detail of his surroundings, acclimating himself as ashes and soot float down cleaving to clothes, skin, and grass. The dark eyes alight upon Will and Will stops to crouch on all fours in front of Hannibal.

Their eyes lock and Will's breath catches fast in his throat, a current of heat snaps between them, familiar and sweet, the taste like a static charge on his tongue and crackling crisply through his nostrils. Every hair on his body prickles with the charge. Will blinks up at Hannibal and the sparks fade to swirling ash.

Hannibal feels the electrifying sizzle over his skin like a spray of splintering glass. He peers at the wild animal swathed in bloodied and tattered clothes that freezes in the tall grass, sucking in breath through bared teeth. A shiver of heat melts along his back sending the hair along his neck to bristling. His nose tingles with the odors of their commingled blood and sweat, an intoxicating scent he can almost taste like the delicate notes of a rare vintage captured in crystal. This is a scent he knows well.

The sight of Will on all fours is alluring as always but Hannibal merely raises a brow. He turns to look back at the destruction in their wake. All is quiet but for the ravenous flames that consume the building foot by foot. An entire section of wall has been crippled by the fire and Mason's remaining hogs, the ones that did not succumb to the smoke inhalation, have made it through the crumbling concrete and are now roaming the Tuscan hills surrounding the old slaughter house. Hannibal finds the sight of the ancient breed climbing the hill oddly appropriate as the slaughter house continues to crumble in a haze of flame and smoke.

Will stares at the floating ash above Hannibal's head, eye catching movement in the trees. Will's wolf emerges from the thicket of pines pausing at the edge of the field and sniffing at the falling ash that disintegrates upon its sleek coat. Like a grey ghost it begins to circle him leaving a trail of crisp white blades in its wake, and Will feels an arctic whisper about his neck, a semblance of snow in the air as brown grass becomes white powder. Will blinks struggling to remain focused on the withered ground with Hannibal as the grey wolf prowls the frosted perimeter and wondering what prompts the wolf's wandering from his inferno.

Hannibal moans softly, shifting uncomfortably on the ground, awkward in his pain, unused to its constraints. The blonde brows draw in a tight cluster and eyes close as the thin lips tremble with the relentless throbbing.

Will looks into Hannibal's face, struck at how minute the difference between a grunt of pain and a gasp of pleasure.

"Got yourself shot, didn't you? You should have dropped as soon as you saw him." Will scolds so the relief he feels stays buried deep down. He is reluctant to let the wolf out of his sight but he stares transfixed by the grimace that floats in the firelight like the graven image of a fearful and savage deity.

"Instinctive." Another grunt.

"He almost got his head shot." Will snaps ignoring the more plausible and obvious reason Hannibal had shoved him out of line of fire. "What were you thinking?"

"No time to shout a precaution. A difficult shot at best." Hannibal lies smoothly through his teeth, words delivered in his usual clipped way.

"That's why you knocked me down?" Will frowns, picks a couple brown blades of grass from his tongue and wipes at his mouth, "Reckless."

"Impulsive." Hannibal counters, eyes narrowed to slits as he assesses Will's reaction to his admission.

"Inconvenient."

Will enunciates each syllable as pale blue eyes bore into him. Hannibal turns his gaze from the persistently impenitent blue stones and glances at the gaping hole in his jacket, peels the leather and shirt from the wound exposing the torn flesh and revealing a round sunken cavity. The bullet struck in a remarkably familiar spot, the finger sized hole a near match to the scar Will bears from that long ago afternoon in Minnesota where Jack shot Will before he could fire off his Glock at Hannibal's face.

Hannibal lifts his head, eyes drawn to the bared shoulders and the circular scar left by Jack's bullet. A crater carved into a pale marble moon.

"Fated." Hannibal says lifting a brow.

Will stares at his scar, blue eyes blinking with associations spilling like an avalanche in his skull. As though he needed any more snapshots seemingly pasted to his skull. The bruised lips move from side to side, the vision of Hobbs slumped in the corner gives way to clouded images of Hannibal and Jack looking down at him in the same position in the same corner. He sits back upon his heels, rocking slightly to steady himself so the tumult dies down and the memories of kitchens and guns and wounds are once again stuffed away in the overflowing trunk.

Hannibal observes the blinking eyes, not unusual for Will but certainly excessive now especially combined with the rigidly set jaw and furrowed brow, indications of heightened awareness and brain activity. Will's eyes drop with the scrutiny, the ground immediately a source of fascination.

Those pale blue eyes are not always a reliable window; Will assumes the perspectives of others whether he wants to or not, their emotions ripple over his face more often than he knows. When Will looks, he sees and associations breed like bacteria in his mind. Unable to control the assault any more than he can control a virus he limits exposure by avoiding eye contact and insists on wearing those ridiculous glasses he does not need. Hannibal remembers the first time Will had come to his therapy session without his precious buffer. A courtesy for his psychiatrist at first, later the equivalent of fighting bare-knuckled as they had each stripped away the veneer of pretense in their zero sum game.

When Will had stopped wearing his glasses for Hannibal, Hannibal had considered the gesture a token of respect, a rejection of the charade Will perpetrates on everyone else. Will takes off his glasses when he desires to see and be seen; it is a voluntary act and entirely symbolic.

Hannibal had let Will see him, know him. But Will, his precious infuriating Will had projected what he thought Hannibal desired to see, projects now what he wants Hannibal to see and denies him the rest. Hannibal accepts this, understands Will's nature, but he wants to know the Will he has experienced in fragments and flashes and to be with him for longer than the glimpse or the shudder Will has let slip.

Unfortunately, Will has proven he can fabricate emotions convincingly and devastatingly. He has also learned how to mask his own emotions and mask them well. However, Hannibal can discern when Will is being avoidant and when he retreats into his imagination. As they face each other in the smoke and grass, Hannibal knows Will is plagued by the nightmare images that follow him from the inferno of his dreams.

His retreats have become spontaneous; Will is at the mercy of his subconscious and he drifts between realities. Daniel has to know; impossible for Will to conceal his state of mind from his accomplished therapist and he is comfortable with Daniel besides. He likely hallucinated while unconscious on the drive to the slaughter house and perhaps after he regained consciousness.

As Hannibal observes Will in the here and now, he is convinced Will has been hallucinating for quite a while; Clayton's hypnotherapy had been the catalyst. Unaware of the particulars of Will's therapy at the time, Hannibal had initially been inclined to think the dilemma posed by Ruggerio had triggered a retreat, but it had quickly become apparent that Will's imagination was working overtime well before Du Maurier arrived. Daniel's admission earlier confirmed for Hannibal a time line of sorts.

Will was definitely somewhere else just before Pazzi fired off his Berretta. Hannibal had been talking to him, but the blue eyes had stared vacantly ahead, mind running an inner dialog while legs had run on autopilot. Will navigates through multiple realities and Hannibal suspects the dosing dealt by Daniel and Du Maurier have triggered neural responses left dormant but not forgotten; responses Hannibal had provoked in therapy, reinforced with conditioning, and faithfully cataloged as Will's encephalitis had progressed. If a man believes himself mad he becomes the madman he fears.

Will remains an enigma, the inner mechanisms of his mind indefinable and his imagination unreachable and mystifying. He is unique and Hannibal would spend a lifetime trying to understand a fraction of the entire gift Will possesses.

"We both knew he was out here. Both of us tempted Fate."

"You would rather have taken the shot?" Hannibal asks, raising a brow.

The blue eyes narrow and Will chews a moment on his lip before offering Hannibal a sliver of a smile.

"That's a non sequitur isn't it?" Will says and resumes chewing his lip.

Hannibal grunts, unsatisfied with the response but he recognizes a brick wall when he sees one. Whatever Will's spontaneous emotional response to the gunfire Hannibal has missed it. Will has already adjusted for it and buried it behind blue tinted steel. As it is, Will remains crouched in front him, stubbornly silent, chewing on his bottom lips waiting for cues, conditioning intact.

"Well…as I said, impulsive. A decision I am reevaluating."

Hannibal looks back to his shoulder, but not before noticing the swollen lips quiver with a flickering of feigned indignation. He knows the pools of blue churn, thoughts and emotions spinning in the tousled head. Hannibal thinks gratitude is evidently not among them. The wound within Hannibal's chest flinches with every note Will strikes in this symphony they write.

"Fate…apparently has a sense of irony." The tone is casual, almost flippant.

"What did he fire?"

"What diff…a Beretta. Service weapon, like Ruggerio's."

"I noticed you don't pack a Glock anymore."

Will chuckles, more a groan really at Hannibal's rare colloquialism and his preoccupation with the weapons Will uses. Will thinks them both mad as they sit bleeding in the grass as pigs scurry from the blazing slaughter house behind them. He rubs at his throbbing cheek, careful not to actually touch the open cut.

"A Berretta is easier to get in Italy." he says simply, "Though I suspect when you're staring down the barrel they look a lot alike."

"So they do." Hannibal grinds his teeth. "At least it wasn't you aiming at me."

"That…would have been what? Four times? Five?"

"Five."

"Pazzi is going to have a hell of head start if we don't get going. You're going to bleed out. Where did you park?"

Will glances up the hill. Hannibal has had enough time to collect himself.

Hannibal's eyes shift from exquisite face to bared shoulder to face again. "No need to get testy."

Will looks aside, sighs…deeply.

"Took off like a bat out of hell, didn't he?"

"Yes…he did. Doesn't realize hell is not a matter of geography." Will mumbles, glancing at the road. "*I believe I am in hell; therefore I am in hell*."

"You're familiar with Rimbaud? *As the damned soul rises, so does the fire*."

The pale blue eyes widen and lips curl to release a retort. Will chokes out a laugh, not sure if they are still talking about Pazzi, "Rimbaud was a tortured young man, touched by madness."

"And saw the beauty in his madness." Hannibal nods his head toward the burning slaughter house as blood drips through his fingers and down his arm. "As do you."

"A poet who embraced his madness and his exclusion, reveled in it uncompromisingly. Not surprising you identify with his poetry and see something of me in all that…misery."

"Hardly a shot in the dark to presume you share an affinity." Hannibal's brows creep up.

Will lets it drop. Hannibal has shifted his lens from Dante to Rimbaud but he still seeks entry through Will's Gates of Hell, to join him in the fiery madness of his inferno. Will is happy to oblige; Hannibal built the foundation after all and lit the match, a spark of sulphur seasoned with the scent of sandalwood.

"*And so the delights of damnation become ever more profound*." Will glances up at the falling ash, rolling his eyes toward the slaughter house.

"Hmmmm." Hannibal muses, "*A thrust of the pitchfork, a drop of fire*." Will favors him with a nod; a crease of amusement graces the battered and bristled cheek.

"I suppose a bullet is like a drop of fire." Will glances at his scar before turning his attention to Hannibal's face once again.

"That…is an apt description."

Much too apt, Hannibal thinks. His shoulder is exploding with a pain quite different from any pain he has felt before. His shoulder seems stuck, difficult to move and he thinks he detects something more than enflamed tissue. Instinct tells him the bullet remains lodged between tendons and bone. Time seems suspended in a frozen moment of thunderous blaze, crickets and the sound of breathing…his own and Will's. He sits listening to the thud of his heart as it sends blood coursing to his wound. He realizes he is exhibiting the symptoms of shock.

“We have to go.” Will brushes at the withered grass in his hair; voice edged with impatience as he stands up and extends his hand. “Can you walk?”

Hannibal takes the outstretched hand and pauses. He is eye level with the waistband of Will’s beltless trousers and his gaze is drawn to the swirl of hair around the navel and the jagged silver threading across Will’s stomach, his forgiveness carved forever into the flesh Hannibal would have again. The curve of the scar reminds Hannibal of a ghostly smile in the moonlight beneath a pair of brown nipple eyes.

A wave of dizziness washes over him and he realizes the blood loss is affecting him. He feels… giddy. The thought brings a wan smile and he blinks a couple times, feeling vaguely foolish besides and looks up to find the familiar frown upon the otherwise impassive face floating above him. He steels himself against the vertigo as Will pulls him to his feet.

He slings his right arm over Will’s shoulders, feels the grip of Will’s hand upon it warm and snug while his other arm slips about Hannibal’s waist gripping the flesh there and hugging him close. He wobbles, leans on Will heavily until he finds his balance.

“You lead.” Will says grasping the hand on his shoulder more tightly and steadying himself under Hannibal’s weight.

“This way…” Hannibal nods up, toward the incline of shadows and from where the scent of pine stirs in the smoky breeze. “We need to get to the medical bag.”

Will lags a step behind, feet smarting and the angle of the incline requiring extra effort to navigate. Hannibal’s right arm rides his shoulder as he lurches along and Will muses that though he deigns to admit it, god-like Achilles is mortal. As they stumble up the hill together Will mentally prepares himself to take over the medical duties, already assuming Hannibal’s clinical perspective and trusting that Hannibal will guide him through what needs to be done.

Even before they reach the crest of the hill the shine of metal catches his eye and the chrome covered body of Hannibal’s Ducati gleams in the moonlight. The frown deepens.

“This…is what you…parked?” Will can’t keep the annoyance at bay; his tone is as tight as his jaw.

“This…is what I rode to Fiesole. I would think that obvious. What did you expect? Clayton’s Mercedes?”

“You could have said…”

Will’s mind immediately recalls leaving Mason’s snow covered estate with Hannibal and suffering yet another sin of omission as Hannibal had confessed it from the passenger seat in his Volvo.

Matteo? You killed Matteo in your office?

Yes, well, Matteo was wounded in the attack. Fatally. He didn’t die there.

What you’re saying is that there is more mess to clean up?

Unless Carlo had been polite.

You might have mentioned that before now.

You're right. Perhaps next time.

"I did." Hannibal is saying, "You weren't listening. Where did you go while we ran?"

Will ignores the inquiry and the challenging dark eyes and ambles over to the bike mind quickly assessing its dimensions, the seat in particular. He clenches his jaw and rubs at irritated eyes.

Hannibal is beside him immediately, propped on his right arm and sifting through his beleaguered jacket with trembling fingers feeling for the liner pocket containing the keys Will assumes he needs to unlock the baggage compartment under the seat.

Soon Hannibal is on the ground and Will sits across from him with Hannibal's medical kit and a roll of bandages. The knapsack lays upon the pine needles, opened, its contents littered on the ground. Rubbing his fingers with the antiseptic wipes Will takes a visual inventory of the items in the kit. He can't think of any contingency Hannibal missed whilst preparing for battle.

Hannibal begins peeling off the heavy jacket, breath laden with stifled grunts. The air is sticky and close and removing the heavy jacket is frustrating. Will leans in to assist, tugging the thick leather down, surprised Hannibal lets him. This draws pained hisses and Will's mouth twitches in sympathy.

He continues to tug until the jacket is off and starts on the shirt next. It sticks to the sweaty skin, the gaping wound flecked with fibers from cotton and leather. The shirt is soaked with blood and Will has to rip it from him. With a choked groan Hannibal folds onto his shoulder, body quaking with involuntary shivers from the chill of shock or the pain, Will can't tell which. His hands hang in the air heavy with indecision, the impulse to offer comfort at odds with the impulse to…gloat.

His impulses or Hannibal's?

Does it matter? The voice hisses pleasantly, *Deny me, deny yourself. Embrace me, embrace yourself…*

"A new experience for you." Will says, tone unequivocally flat, "That's…going to leave a nasty scar."

Will needs no weapon with such a sharp tongue Hannibal decides. Fear has raised his shield of sarcasm and it will remain until he is ready to wield his blade of forgiveness. Even Steven. It would appear Patroclus has a bone to pick with Achilles, an itch that needs scratching and he fears what form the scratching might take.

Patroclus finds it much easier to don his armor than to remove the suit beneath it.

Transitions. Will clings to the suit he made of Hannibal unable to pluck nothing more than a few buttons, unsure of how to remove it he has worn it so long. Perhaps fearful of taking off too much so soon. When Will takes off his fabricated suit he will be naked, truly naked before Hannibal for the first time. Adam must be naked to see the garden and to enter it.

Will is as reluctant to remove the suit as he is to leave his inferno. And leaving his inferno requires forgiveness in whatever form that might take. Hannibal sighs…patience.

"Quite a scar." Another throb of pain hits and Hannibal clenches the damp sleeve of Will's shirt with his right hand, "Tell me, Will, how does that make you feel?"

“How does it make you feel?” The cold taunt falls from the warm lips that brush against his hair.

Achilles has just razed Troy for his Patroclus. Taken a bullet for him. He can scratch any itch Patroclus may have, and then some. What matters is that Patroclus is here, with him.

“Inspired. I’ll think how I acquired it every time I look at it.” Comes the quiet reply.

And another shudder of pain.

Hannibal presses his nose into the blood stained shoulder that smells of earth and sweat and musky sweetness, the ache in his chest every bit as painful and wonderful as the agonizing throb in his shoulder. A moan slips between teeth as the touch of tentative fingers alights upon his neck to gently gather the locks of hair there. The fingers continue to stroke along the nape of his neck for a moment, the touch tremulous almost shy. So infuriating…to salt the wound and then lick the salt.

Will cradles Hannibal’s head on his shoulder with one hand and with the other presses the towel he holds on the bullet wound. The towel is instantly steeped in red and he feels Hannibal flinching against his chest. He’s got to stop the bleeding. He tries not to think about the sandalwood scented hair and the moist mouth upon his skin, breath scalding his nerves like a hot iron. He bites his sore lip as he concentrates on the moment, the tenderness beneath his teeth grounding him, keeping him from drifting, from imagining the haughty blonde warrior sitting astride him, hips grinding him pleasantly into sand under a warm blazing sun.

You want this… The hiss of the creature’s voice tickles his ears as talons sink into his shoulders.

I hate that I want this…that I want this…with him…With you.

You refuse to see the garden, Will. Do you know why you can’t see it?

I can’t seem to get you out of my head…

Every life is a piece of music. Like music, we are finite events, unique arrangements, sometimes harmonious, sometimes dissonant…

“You’ll have to lean against the bike. Keep upright.” Will whispers into Hannibal’s ear.

“Yes…good.” Hannibal manages, coming back to himself. “Give me the bag. I’ll need a shot of a local anesthetic.”

“You’re going to let me inject you with drugs.”

“Yes.” Hannibal growls, “Try not to enjoy it too much.”

Will pushes Hannibal back, gently, and helps him get situated next to the Ducati. He folds the towel so it sits thick upon Hannibal’s shoulder, the wound trickles blood still and the chiseled cheeks appear sallow, dangerously pale. He takes Hannibal’s right hand and places it over the towel, presses it against the wound.

“Hold this.” Will says. “I’ll get the bag.”

Hannibal holds the towel in place while he watches Will search through the kit, fingers methodically touching items as he mentally catalogs them. Will removes the hermetically sealed syringe from its wrapping and holds up a vial, squints at the label.

“Lidocaine?”

“A reliable local. Should last a few hours.”

“Small vial.”

Hannibal nods, “Inject it right into the wound. It will take several minutes so do it now.”

“How much?”

“Use the entire vial. Larger area than gums. This is not a root canal.”

“Huh…ever had a root canal?” Will sniffs as he fills the syringe.

“There’s antiseptic in there. Rinse out the wound after the shot.”

Will nods as he edges closer across the pine needles to kneel at Hannibal’s side to administer the shot. Hannibal’s hands brush his knees, sending a spray of pine needles and flashes of those hands holding another syringe in a dark room, fireplace blazing and the strains of Bach meandering around his skull fill his mind. He can almost feel its sharp tip prick the skin of his forearm as he imagines the impassive chiseled face move in the firelight, needle sinking into his flesh.

He takes a breath and swallows, looks into the hooded dark eyes inches from his own; fingers sliding along the smooth plastic of the syringe poised over the exposed shoulder and ripped flesh. The impulse to lash out at the creature that has caused him so much pain seems to concentrate in his hand.

Creators often feel contempt for their creations when they don’t live up to…expectations.

Creations have a nasty habit of presuming to know what those expectations are. They make… mistakes.

As though the fault lay in the clay and not the hands that fashioned it.

“Will…” Hannibal says noting the grim expression and the rhythmic rubbing of fingers along the syringe, “Introduce the anesthetic slowly, like a dentist would administer it, numbing tissue a little at a time.”

Hands and fingers obey but Will sees himself unceremoniously jabbing the needle in, feels the tug of satisfaction as Hannibal groans and the shoulder writhes beneath his fingers. It takes a moment to empty the needle. The satisfaction deepens as Hannibal’s dark eyes peer at him between pained slits.

Did you enjoy that, Will? Hannibal grunts.

I did. Will holds the dark red rimmed eyes in his gaze as glossy black feathers erupt around the wound.

Good, hold on to that feeling. But, before you stab me with something else…

Will blinks, his fingers tremble as he withdraws the syringe slowly.

"…call Doctor Daniel. When you've finished exchanging pleasantries, hand me the phone and I'll text the location where he is to meet us."

Will is acutely aware Hannibal knows he zoned out just then. He is not imagining the appraising expression on Hannibal's face or the glimmering of accusation in his eyes.

"You discussed these arrangements with him beforehand?" Will shakes off the disorientation and reaches for a clean cloth and the bottle of antiseptic.

"More or less. He needs the specifics. Tell him to bring the duffle bag I left in the garage and a change of clothes for you as well. And water. And…"

"I think I can figure out the rest. Can you hold it in place while I call?"

"Make it quick."

Daniel stands staring into the trunk of his Mercedes, thoughts jumbled up like his nerves. He wipes his sweaty palms across his trousers and picks up the notepad and pen from the bumper. He checks off each item on the list as he accounts for it in the trunk, the mental exercise an inadequate remedy for his roiling stomach.

He had been at his computer checking Tattle Crime and finding it had not been updated all day had been scrolling through local news blogs when his cell phone had chirped. He had closed his eyes in profound relief at reading Will's number on the screen but his hand had trembled anyway, fingers slipping around the cool plastic and grasping tightly as he had pressed the phone to his ear holding his breath.

Will?

Yeah…I'm okay…for the most part. You okay?"

His heart had lurched, the sound of Will's voice releasing him from the vice that had held ribs and muscles in its grip since Hannibal had rode off into the night. A wretched vice that no amount of wine or whiskey had been able to lubricate but the throaty cracked cadence of Will's voice had seemingly slipped around his insides like oil.

Better now…Hannibal?

He's here.

Fu…Of course he is. Where are you?

Not far from the…crime scene. But we have to leave…meet you someplace else.

Hannibal had said as much.

I hate this…

I know. I'm not liking it much myself.

I have to make this quick. Write it down…

Daniel slams the trunk with heavy hands and shoves those shaky hands in his pockets. Trepidation tingles along his neck as his fingers close around his car keys. He is an accomplice; complicit and completely cognizant of his actions and the consequences of those actions. He is no longer providing therapy; he is actively participating in committing a crime…numerous crimes. But, he doesn't *feel* like he is committing a crime. Quite the opposite.

When you find what you seek, you will thrill to it. And you will hate yourself for wanting the thrill. But that is who you are.

Daniel is wondering who he is. The mirror he holds up to himself is no longer solid and true but a shimmering pool. His reflection seems a fluid thing that ripples with multiple images every time he tries to touch its smooth surface. He wants, he needs, and he loves. Will feels these emotions, too. Will also hates and Daniel has felt that hate burning through his own veins, choking him with its acid.

He grips the keys in his hand tightly so the metal cuts into the flesh of his palm. The pain draws his attention to the pulsing nerves there and away from the pounding ache in his chest. The ache in his chest is compounded by the thoughts in his head.

How much is left behind to influence who you are at any moment, Will?"

How much of Will is left behind to coat Daniel's mind with the residue of his troubled past? How much of Will does he carry around with him and are the emotions he experiences now truly his? He imagines Will thinking these same thoughts and the thought is terrifying. Daniel has been so focused on helping Will cope with his fear of losing his mind he has lost sight of himself in the process. Just like Will had been so focused on catching Hannibal, he had cast himself adrift in an uncertain sea. He'd had plenty of paddles and had been seeking an anchor. Daniel was supposed to be that anchor.

Daniel climbs into the front seat and starts the ignition. His phone chirps beside him and Jack Crawford's number lights up the screen.

Can you tell the difference between your emotions and the killer's? Will? Is there a difference between your emotions and the killer's?

Jack wonders the same thing about Will. Daniel wonders about himself. The rabbit hole is filled with quicksand. Shovels are useless in quicksand. Will knows this and so had reached out his hand to Daniel and Daniel had taken it. Trouble is Daniel has not pulled Will out; Will has pulled him in.

Adapt, evolve…become.

Daniel guides the Mercedes down the driveway and heads out along *Via Fra Giovanni* descending Fiesole's hills toward the outskirts of Florence and back toward the Paolini's old abandoned slaughter house. The intersection Hannibal had texted is not far from there and it does not take a genius to figure out Mason Verger had used Paolini real estate to stage his trap. Not only conveniently located miles away from town, it is already the sight of a crime that must have fed the Paolini appetite for revenge.

Images of the dismembered Luciano stuffed into Will's Cubist coffin hover in his head and he wonders what images would taint his mind if he were to visit the slaughter house tonight. What carnage has Achilles and Patroclus left in their wake?

Will has evidently not lynched himself to the tree of knowledge that grows in his imagination's garden but neither has he picked up his ax. He picked up armor instead. Daniel is curious as to which armor Will put on. He has run his conversation with Hannibal over and over in his mind and has tried to wed his literary universe with Hannibal's and come up empty.

You are going to save Will, aren't you?

It is always my intention to give Will what he needs. That…is at the heart of the design.

Hannibal has a design. Will has a design. Neither quite sure the design is as alike as they are. Will can think like Hannibal.

You understand his design.

I am part of the design. But he can only predict so much. He has left some of the design to me.

Daniel thinks he should have asked Will to clarify exactly what part of the design he was referring to. Daniel suspects the matter of Patroclus' armor figures prominently.

I took no armour from him.

Haven't you? You've been stripping it from him for weeks, peeled him back layer by layer and made him look at what he does not want to see.

That's why you keep asking him whose armor he wears. He isn't wearing any.

Patroclus gave his armor to Hector, piece by piece, and Achilles, monster that he is, would have it back.

In the *Iliad,* Patroclus borrows Achilles' armor to wear into battle to assume Achilles' identity. The armor Hector takes from Patroclus' corpse belongs to Achilles. It is Achilles' own armor that he takes back from Hector, not Patroclus'. Whose armor does Achilles believe Patroclus shed piece by piece? And where has Patroclus stashed his armor according to Hannibal's *Iliad*?

Daniel pumps the keys in his fist thinking. Achilles' fallen friend and squire was brought to Achilles stripped and broken…his identity no longer concealed. Daniel has similarly stripped and broken Will, has seen him naked as Hannibal never has.

That is the armor Hannibal is talking about. That…is the armor he would have Daniel give back. Not to him…to Will. So that Will can offer it to Hannibal.

Whatever cup Hannibal offered him, Daniel has drunk blindly and this…is not a comforting thought. Mephistopheles does not care that his offer is misunderstood; he will come to collect regardless. The stolen kiss by the couch enters his mind summoning the taste of wine and flesh, a satanic sacrament upon his lips.

With your permission of course.

For what exactly, did he grant permission and seal with that kiss…that sensual wonderful kiss? The elusive armor is figurative, isn't it? The feeling of treading water persists; however, the river of anxiety he had been drowning in before Will's call has receded, its rapids no longer crush against his chest. He has a brand new river to navigate and it floats past the ruins of Troy.

He ignores the exit to the highway, turning off *Via Santo Domenico*. Soon he is driving along one of the local roads, deserted now since tourists tend to keep to the main highways. There are farms nestled among these hills and stretches of back roads lined with fields of sunflowers and orchards of figs and olives. Daniel has not been back this way for years, but he doubts much has changed since he last cruised around exploring and site seeing. He thinks he knows the intersection and the particular road where Hannibal and Will will be waiting for him.

My course is set for an uncharted sea…

Dante's verse pops into his head as Daniel flicks on the high beams. Who fills his sails and steers his ship?

Nine new Muses point the Pole for me…

Daniel decides it is the sisters of Fate who navigate his ship now. Perhaps Fate has been navigating all along and the anchor he throws across his bow has been shifting in a sea of sand.

He shakes out a cigarette, licks his lips in anticipation and draws the slender stick into his mouth, delighting in the immediate calm that flows from the inhale of nicotine. His thoughts roll with the road and as he turns off the air conditioning in favor of the open window, he casts off the cloak of apprehension, lets it slip from his shoulders and into the wind that blows through his hair. He lets Jack Crawford's call slip into the wind as well.

"You hesitate." Hannibal looks into the pale pools of blue searching their depths but sees only his reflection mirrored there.

Recent events seem to mirror their shared past, reflections of the rooms that reside within Hannibal's memory palace, shades of this uncertain symphony they write together. The dissonance Hannibal feels echoes through the vast halls of his memory palace and the thought occurs that the chords they strike between them are not dissonant as much as notes scattered upon a blank score.

Truth touches us as well; plucks a chord like a finger plucks a string.

Have I plucked a chord?

Many more than you know. And Will, we never truly know the value of something until it is lost to us.

That…is a chord that should resonate…for both of us.

If I were to pluck you enough, would the truth resonate from those places I cannot reach?

There has been truth in every word, every note exchanged between us. Our ears are not attuned to hear it.

Then, what a tragedy it would be to lose that melody until hearts can interpret what ears cannot.

The symphony they would write, like their *Iliad* is not yet written, the score unfinished and the ink still wet. What Hannibal has been hearing is not dissonance but the sound of Will stumbling through yet another transition. They are, in essence, transitioning from one movement to another and this one is no *adagio*, but an *allegro.* The score is new, unfamiliar and unsure of the melody, Will experiments, striking notes he already knows.

Like the garden that cannot breach the fires of his inferno, Will cannot see the notes because Will does not want to see them. He continues to compose from the depths of his inferno, clinging to the coda and playing it again, and again, and again… Truth does resonate between them and Hannibal is reaching…and listening.

“I…contemplate.” Will says scalpel poised over Hannibal’s shoulder.

He adjusts the angle of the blade he holds in his hand, considers the fragments of cloth and leather he has already removed from the wound and focuses on the dark mass of metal lodged between tissue and bone.

Will was somehow not surprised that Pazzi’s shot had missed major arteries and veins, had in fact missed clavicle, scapula, and the head of the humerus, the ball joint of the shoulder and crucial to its functioning. Splintering or shattering any of these would have rendered the left arm useless, but the bullet’s momentum was apparently stopped by divine intervention and it is now wedged between ligaments and, according to Hannibal, the acromion of the scapula. Will does not have to dig deep to retrieve it, but he does have to dig.

After hanging up from Daniel, the anesthetic had kicked in, Hannibal had ceased to lean on him and the tender moments of the embrace evaporated with the pain. Will is reminded of the Greek kylix from the table setting in Impruneta. A similar moment shared between Achilles and Patroclus as Achilles had bandaged Patroclus’ arm. As he holds the scalpel above the bullet he is not feeling particularly tender. That is, he is not experiencing any singular emotion, but a scrambling of emotions that splash across the canvas of his skull to drip like wet paint in the rain.

Usually, removing the bullet is not the most important part of triage, stopping the bleeding enough to operate is the priority, often leaving the bullet where it is, but Hannibal wanted the bullet out. Will had systematically clamped the torn vessels with an assist by Hannibal to hold the hemostat in place, and tied them off so they no longer leaked. Hannibal had assured him it should be a fairly simple procedure given Will’s previous anatomy lessons with Tier.

Will had dryly asked for a saw.

“Feels good to play God, doesn’t it?” Hannibal says suddenly breaking the silence.

Hannibal’s eyes remain riveted to Will’s face noting the sheen of perspiration that glistens on the whiskers of his upper lip and stains the arched brows. Bland blue pools stare back at him though the subtle twitching at the corner of his mouth evokes answer enough.

“Performing surgery made you feel like God.” Will deflects…naturally.

“You hold the implement of divinity in your hand.”

“Creation and destruction.”

Retribution or forgiveness. Which is it, Will?”

“Difficult to tell the difference, isn’t it? I couldn’t.”

The blue eyes do not falter. Neither does Will flinch as he pries malignant metal from pink flesh. The bullet comes loose surprisingly easily.

“Am I conversing with you or am I talking to a version of myself?”

“I suppose that would concern you while I hold a scalpel. Does it bother you that you don’t know?”

“Does it bother you?”

Will shrugs in annoyance, not in answer. They continue to poke one another but no blood drawn yet except from existing wounds of course. Eventually, Hannibal will tire of the pricking and then they will have that honest conversation. And there is the Pazzi problem to resolve. Until then, Will can…be the prick.

Arm pumped full of lidocaine, Hannibal cannot feel Will’s sharp prodding, but Will can feel his. Hannibal would rather Will remain in the moment with him, not on some retreat in his skull. Agitating that itch should keep him present.

“Your nightmares follow you still.”

Will’s eyes remain fixed upon the task before him and Hannibal presses further, the desire to push Will out of the comfort zone he has built around himself is all consuming. And necessary.

“You awaken to cold sweats and tangled sheets…despite Doctor Clayton’s best efforts I imagine.”

The dark brows furrow with concentration and the lips purse together but the promise of a retort is false and teeth draw the battered bottom lip inside.

Will sighs expelling the images inspired by Hannibal’s taunts. His attention is focused on lifting the bullet from where it has settled into bone without scraping something he shouldn’t. He sets down the scalpel, deciding he doesn’t need it. He inserts the long surgical tweezers and grasps the mangled bullet, lifts it from its soft and bloody bed and gently withdraws allowing tissue to fold back upon itself.

Will examines the savage little cylinder he holds in the tweezers and extends it to Hannibal.

“Think that’s all of it?”

“I believe so. Excellent work.” Hannibal says squinting at the bullet, “I’ll go to neither the tombs nor the worms.”

“*Satan*,” Will bites his tongue to keep the smile from his lips and fails, “*you fraud, you would dissolve me with your charms*.”

Hannibal looks up from the stained bullet into the doleful pale blue eyes. The bruised lips settle into a line, a soft bed where more taunts like this must surely lie in wait for Hannibal’s tongue to slip between petal soft flesh and draw them out.

“Pet names already?”

“I’ve plenty more.” Will drops the bullet to the ground. Forensics is welcome to it if they can find it.

“If you think that’s all of it, what next?”

“Sutures. Clean it again. Wash out any debris you missed.”

“You could stitch it yourself.” Will says.

“I could have dug out the bullet myself, too, but one handed will take too much time. It needn’t be pretty, just efficient.”

“You know, Daniel could…”

Hannibal shakes his head. “He’s certainly competent, but the wound needs to be closed before we get on the bike.”

Hannibal nods to the bottles of antiseptic. Will drizzles the contents directly over the gaping hole sparingly, knowing Hannibal cannot feel the sting as it washes the wound. He lets it froth and bubble for a moment before leaning back to let it dry. He catches Hannibal’s approving gaze as he readies the nylon surgical thread.

“Boy Scout training?”

“Police training…” Will almost tosses off a smile.

“Then you know foreign matter in the wound is usually the cause of infection.” Hannibal says catching the dropped smile regardless.

“The bullet is practically sterile from the heat. It’s the stuff it drags with it that poses risk. Lucky for you the *Polizia* use full metal jacket, not hollow points. Looks like the bone deflected the bullet…somehow.”

Hannibal thinks Fortuna’s favor merely follows the dictates of the Fates, but Will shrinks from Fortuna’s brimming cup, preferring to drink the dust of his inferno, the Fates unable to reach him there. The synchronous melody grows faint again between them and Hannibal would have it soar. He selects the next note with care, strikes a sharp so the heart beating beside him can hear what the ears will not.

“You believe your wound is infected.” Hannibal nods his head toward Will’s midriff.

“That little scratch?” Will tugs at a suture, eyes clouding immediately.

“That little scratch sent you to Clayton hoping he could rinse out the residue. But the leviathan growing inside didn’t die as you hoped. You didn’t wade into your stream, either.”

Will threads the stiff nylon through pink ruptured skin with tweezers and ties off the stitch. He winces with the creature’s coiling that coincides with Hannibal’s words as though he had uttered an incantation disturbing its slumber.

“My stream is dry. I see its hollow bed in a desert of flames every time I look for it. My season in hell did not end on your kitchen floor.”

“The mind is its own place, isn’t it? Why not revel in what you are?”

He offers Hannibal a wry grimace thinking that knowing *where* he is at any given moment would be progress of a kind.

“I revel.” Will sighs, preferring to circumvent the fuse Hannibal would overload if he let him.

“You revel in the violence, take pleasure in the intimacy of killing with your hands. Then, punish yourself for the pleasure.”

“I revel in ecstasy, nightmares, and sleep in a nest of flames.”

Cool breath brushes his cheek as Will turns his head away, “Not the nest you vacated.” Hannibal counters, “That nest is as warm and fragrant as it ever was. The air of hell tolerates no hymns but you and I hear one melodious concert.”

Will finally lifts his eyes to Hannibal’s, tasting the tang of anger upon his tongue. The arrogance that radiates from Hannibal’s smug face is second only to the conceit spilling from his mouth.

“You should suffer in Hell for your anger. Hell for your pride.”

“I suffer. We are alone without each other. Do you remember our conversation as you climbed out of our bed that last time?”

Will flinches with the words; his neck stiffening against the tide of images that swirl before his eyes as he holds tweezers and scissors in his hands.

You have allowed me to become very intimate with you. There is no part of you I have not committed to memory.

Is that a…thank you?

Typical of Hannibal to pair the intimacy of surgery with the intimacy of sex. He knows how jarring Will finds the juxtaposition of invoked imagery with spoken word and is forcing him to shift gears as it were.

“I remember.” He manages not looking up. “Is there a point?”

“That melody we spoke of…can you still hear it?”

That melody you hear, Will. An unfinished symphony, the ink still wet…

“As clearly as the siren’s song. *That poison, that kiss, a thousand times accursed.* I climbed out from a bed of lies.”

“Whose lies, Will? An entire symphony of hells you suffer because you did not stay. Because you did not wade into your stream. Because you stand before the garden…”

“Alone.”

“You are not alone. I’m standing right beside you.”

Truth has its own peculiar ring and Will hears the chiming, a tinkling rising above the jumbled notes of this, this symphony they would write together.

Transitions are difficult, especially for you. As your piano playing suggests…

Will snips the excess of the last suture biting his tongue. He looks over his handiwork, decides quickly it's not pretty, but the stitching is adequate and should hold.

"Done. Have a look." Will says, wiping his hands of more than blood. And yet the stain of intimacy sticks to his skin, his nose, his lips.

They had an agreement and Will decides he will not be drawn into that honest conversation until he's good and ready. Tossing around Rimbaud and anyone else from their twisted canon will have to suffice. The wind whistles through the pines dispelling the smell of smoke somewhat though Will's eyes still see the grove where they sit beside the Ducati through the flames of his inferno. Shadows cast by the blaze of the fire move over the trees and Will's wolf moves with the shadows. He knows the persistent scraping of bark is the sound of talons reaching through the fires of his mind.

Hannibal checks the stitches. They are tight and uniform, exactly how Hannibal would have done. The slender fingers upon his flesh had summoned memories of dismembering Randall Tier with Will. Hannibal remembers how nimbly the fingers had handled the knives, saws, and scalpels, hands so like his own, surgeon's hands immediately comfortable holding the tools of the trade and unshrinking from the intimacy of the raw naked anatomy before him. Difficult indeed to tell whose armor Patroclus wears at the moment.

Will kneels in front of him, eyes bathed in detachment, brows up and wearing the perpetual frown as he waits for Hannibal's assessment before applying the bandages he holds.

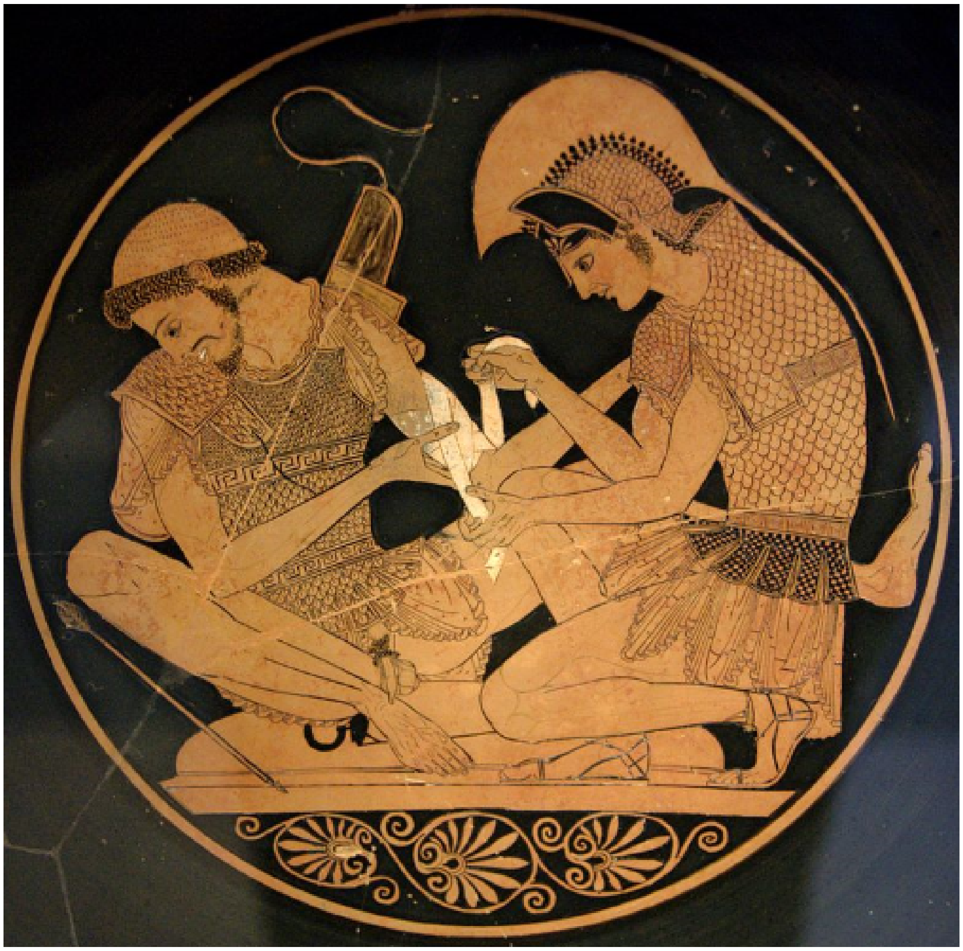
"I couldn't have done better myself." Hannibal inspects his shoulder, rolls it around watching bone and muscle move.

Will nods his appreciation and presses a patch of gauze to the stitches, applies the tape while his mind wanders in the silence Hannibal is sure to disrupt any second. And he does.

"Life imitates art. Parallels unique to us." Hannibal says, looking into Will's eyes.

"The kylix at your house. I was reminded of that while I…operated."

"It is Achilles, not Patroclus, whose arm receives bandages. Thoughts?"



Achilles bandages the arm of Patroclus, Sosias or Kleophrades Painter, Attic Red Figure Kylix 500 BC

Images of the red figures painted on the black ceramic surrounded by a cascade of scarlet and white hyacinths fill his mind again. A romanticized overture then and now. Hannibal's drawings and that kylix had prompted the course of his hallucinations that evening, but Will knows emotions loosened by Du Maurier's injected cocktail had played their part as well. He avoids Hannibal's gaze, knows too that the dark piercing eyes are scrutinizing every inch of him.

Their circle of violence and intimacy is always present. Will has but to lean into that upturned face for scrutiny to become seduction. He's not sure the scrutiny isn't intended as seduction. The very air they share crackles still between them, the intimacy of dressing the wound summoning associations both torturous and undeniably amorous. He needs to fill the air with repellant words before he succumbs to the longing the sandalwood scented hair has sent clamoring clear to marrow.

“A reversal of roles suggests a reversal of their fate?” Will huffs with just enough sarcasm to raise a blonde brow.

Will continues wrapping the gauze around Hannibal's shoulder as Hannibal extends his numbed arm out so Will can reach the underside. He wraps carefully, not too tightly so movement is not encumbered and blood can flow unrestricted. Hannibal needs as much movement as possible to steer the Ducati.

“Patroclus requested their ashes be buried together. Appeared to Achilles in a dream.”

Hannibal’s words fall gently and Will blinks away the images of young Hannibal’s lithe body wrapped around his as they had teased one another on the shore; blinks back the sensuousness of soft skin sliding between his legs and rough sand scratching along his back. These are not memories he tells himself, but fantasies of a mind slowly losing its tenuous grip on reality.

“They were buried together.” Will says, “Their bones mingled together in death as they had been in life. Are you requesting the same?”

“I would rather our bones mingle together in life, wouldn’t you?”

The rhythmic wrapping falters and lips purse, another tremulous transition raises a discerning brow. Hannibal can almost see Will fidget within his inferno too fearful to grasp the cup that would slake his thirst. And yet he had ripped Cordell apart with the same hands that gently bandage his wound, the touching timid and uncertain like the cautious caress of fingers along the gloss of ivory keys.

“*Living, thee alone I’ll have; and when dead I’ll be thy grave*.” Will says suddenly, his tone as somber as the verse he quotes.

“You remember our conversation at Boboli?”

Surprise mingles with pleasure and the thin lips shift slightly at the unexpected albeit subtle confession. The single note becomes a chord, tentative and lightly struck but promising nonetheless as Will continues to fumble through this new and delicate transition.

“Bits and pieces.” Will traces his thumb over the gauze, smoothing out the creases. “More hearts and flowers to atone for the wound you dealt.”

The promising notes fall silent and the hammer hovers over a familiar sour chord.

“And did I misinterpret the moving missive you carved of Luciano?”

“Did you? A heart for a heart. You see what you want to see. Did the creator see his reflection?” Will counters evenly.

“Clever boy. And yet, here we are.”

“Yes. Here we are. Again.”

Hannibal stares into the pale blue eyes that manage not to blink or look away for a moment. *Patience*. Agamemnon slinks away as they speak, and they have a rendezvous with sorrowful Hector. Menelaus has undoubtedly been reaching out. Even Luciano’s phone received an appeal. The battered warriors may be facing not one, but two Greeks. Hannibal thinks Du Maurier has contacted Uncle Jack by now and has gushed all of Hannibal’s supposed secrets in hopes of moving her pawn.

The viper has yet to learn there are no pawns but the ones he placed on the board in the first place.

“Let’s pack this up and get going. Someone is dialing 911 as we speak and our dear Hector is on his way, his own rendezvous with Fate.” Hannibal says, reaching for his shirt.

“Achilles and Patroclus have a battle with Agamemnon. Hector does not come to challenge Achilles, but to help.” Will reminds him.

“So he does. But our battle shifts from Troy to Florence where the Medici would have their vengeance upon the Pazzi. Hector’s presence is not required…only his chariot.”

Will nods, relief confessed with a sigh. He meets Hannibal’s gaze, allows his fingers to graze over the soft sensitive knuckles that clench at cotton as Will leans to grab the leather jacket. His chest glides over Hannibal’s exposed skin, a teasing pass over pale clammy flesh without actually touching and the abrupt intake of breath from Hannibal is nothing less than gratifying.

A thrust of the pitchfork, a drop of fire.

Will knows he plays with fire, knows intimately just how hot the flames will burn should he tempt too much. He offers the tattered jacket to Hannibal, chin up knowing the intense blue of his eyes and the slackening of his stiff jaw strikes a winsome chord. They are orchestrations of carbon, each of them attuned to the other.

If Adam is to walk in the garden once again, he would invite his creator to taste the flames of his inferno awhile longer and quench his thirst in its ashes.

Will ducks his head behind Hannibal’s back as low as he can, cheek resting on the supple ripped leather arms wrapped snugly about his waist. Wind blows at a suffocating speed and without a helmet Will is disinclined to shift his position despite the incessant pulsing between his legs, the throbbing vibrations of the bike an added torture to the pleasurable pulses aroused by the intimacy. He can barely breathe as it is and his hair bites his face as the Ducati careens along the dark back roads Hannibal insists on navigating by the light of the late August moon.

What poetic irony it would be that Jack finds their mangled corpses by the side of the road come morning all because Hannibal refused to switch on a headlight.

He lets his thoughts wander with the hum of the engine to float in the ether of his mind as his shirt billows in the wind. The abyss of his inferno beckons below as he stands on the precipice perched again on the event horizon of chaos.

The gruesome form of the retribution they intend to inflict upon Pazzi takes shape as Will imagines the exterior of the Palazzo Vecchio. He has walked past the ancient fortress many times but has never been inside. He will have to rely upon Hannibal’s formidable knowledge to guide them through its interior and its security system.

His Beretta is wedged between his trousers and the small of his back and the sensation of the warm metal is a comfort. Pazzi will not give up his weapon easily. He is acquainted with Hannibal’s handiwork, and Will’s. To leave himself exposed to their more intimate inclinations would be suicide. Hannibal has his knife and he has the entire collection of medieval weapons within the walls of the Palazzo at his command.

Daniel keeps coffee table editions of dozens of museums in Italy, the Uffizi and the Palazzos Vecchio and Pitti among them. The Palazzo Vecchio is a virtual arsenal and Hannibal will avail himself of its lethal and priceless antiquities without a second thought. The stain of Pazzi blood is destined to flow down its stone walls again.

Pazzi's fate is sealed; Will has no doubt of that. But Pazzi is not Will's primary concern at the moment. While Hannibal is at last focused on something else, he has had time to think. The Fates do indeed have a wicked sense of irony and every creative act has its destructive consequence. The conversation with Mason at the slaughter house wheedles in his brain like a worm burrowing into wood…or an apple. The possibility of a child, a son, surviving Mason's assault on Margot is almost too much to digest. The sweep of Hannibal's hand seems limitless; tainting everything it touches.

What sort of father would you be?

I would be a good father.

How quickly we form attachments to something that does not yet exist.

I'm not attached. I'm… I'm only anticipating attachment.

The chimes of truth sound off in his head. Will anticipates attachment, certainly, but as the Ducati rumbles through the darkness he can anticipate plenty of other implications from his attachments. His mind drifts as his imagination paints the dim road in orange and red, impressions of falling leaves as he walks from the woods at the edge of the Verger estate into the stables. He breathes in the aroma of fresh cut hay and the unavoidable stench of manure that seems to permeate from the rough wood like sweat from pores.

Margot leans against a stall; the porcelain face lifts in greeting as the blue eyes shine beneath the lacquered lashes. Still outfitted in her riding gear, she tilts her head at Will, and he pauses in his advance to allow her the courtesy of inspecting his attire and his mood.

She smiles as her fingers tug nervously at the braid of hair that sweeps past her narrow shoulders to hang over one breast. The large eyes move over Will, not unappreciatively and, Will thinks, rather warmly. The warmth spreads like a glaze beneath his coat and his cheeks.

"You look well. Can't pry you from the flannel, can we?"

Will shrugs glancing down at his shirt. "Or the plaid. You are…lovely as always. You look happy, Margot."

"I have a lot to be happy about. And grateful…"

Will waves a hand dismissively, immediately uncomfortable. "Gratitude can be fleeting but I hope the happiness is not."

"Where is he?" Margot says, removing her riding gloves.

Will raises a brow, looks hard at Margot. "He didn't come. It's risky enough for me to come."

"Is he nearby?"

"You know I can't tell you where he is. It's safer this way."

Will takes a few steps closer, runs his hand over the bridle hanging next to the stall. The scent of manure and hay stirs with the scrape of hooves inside the stall.

"He's still sweaty. Did you just ride him?"

“Trotted up a little while ago. I’ll brush him down after you leave. I used to let the stable hands do it, but I rather enjoy doing it myself now.”

“I can’t stay long…”

“I know. C’mon inside. You didn’t come all this way to stand in the stable.”

“Still single?” Will asks. “You mentioned…”

“It’s…a work in progress, but her…credentials are promising. Can’t be too careful where children are concerned.”

“No, you can’t.”

Will follows Margot through the stable, down a hall and into the house proper. He seems to float past room after room of sofas and carpets until they reach the stairs. She pauses and turns, eyes dancing with unrestrained excitement.

“I have to admit, I’m dying to see the look on your face when you see him.”

Will chuckles softly, “Am I going to see him…today?”

Will nudges the calf of her leg with his knee and is rewarded with an uncharacteristic playful smile. She resumes her ascent flipping the long braid so it hangs down her back in a stream of plaited gold. Will smiles remembering being smothered in those luxuriant tresses in his bed.

“He’s what…a year and a half now?”

“Sixteen months. I have pictures…”

“If there’s time.”

“His bedroom is back here.” Margot leads him down the wide hallway, past portraits of wrinkled Verger faces and striped satin settees.

“What did you name him?”

“He was already six months old when I got there. They named him Giulio.”

“And you kept it.”

“I call him Leo. Do you like it?”

Will thinks Leo better than Jules. Definitely better than Mason. The Paolini apparently share the Verger predilection for pretension. Giulio is a very old name, dating back centuries, a variation on the patrician name Julius, like Julius Caesar, a supposed descendent of Jupiter…Zeus. There was a Medici pope by the same name…the son of Giuliano, the brother assassinated by Francesco Pazzi…

Will decides he likes the name Leo well enough. “I like it just fine.”

They reach the closed door and Margot begins to turn the doorknob. Will reaches for her hand, covers the waiting fingers with his own as she looks up wonderingly into his face.

"Motherhood agrees with you, Margot. I…am the one who is grateful."

A Mona Lisa smile tugs at the ruby red lips and Margot opens the door so Will can step inside the spacious room filled with plush toys and an array of baby furniture, including an antique rocking chair and upright piano. Will stares at the tiny pink rosebuds and green vines creeping along the wallpaper, eyes tracking the rich cherry wainscoting converging on the huge window behind the crib.

"He should be awake from his nap. He's so good, Will. Smiles all the time…"

"Must be all that Italian cuisine they fed him."

Margot crosses in front of Will so the child, Leo, sees her first. Chubby little legs kick wildly as she approaches the crib.

"Look who's awake!" Margot beams at the amazing little being looking up at her.

"Mama…"

Will can't help but break into a grin. He walks up behind Margot who moves aside, ambles around to other side of the crib and leans in to offer a kiss.

Will looks down at the child wriggling beneath his blanket and his breath catches as he stares into wide blue eyes and a headful of brown curls. The boy blinks up at Will and quickly turns over so he can crawl to the bars. He pulls himself up to stand, curious about this unfamiliar person peering into his crib. He stretches out his arms looking to Margot for approval.

"He looks just like you."

"I don't know about that…" Will says lifting the boy from his crib as stockinged feet kick the blanket away, "But he's beautiful."

Will hugs him close, sniffs his hair enjoying the scent of baby powder and the softness of smooth unblemished skin upon his nose. He thinks he has never felt anything as soft as this. He is unprepared for the aching that swells in his chest and he buries his nose in the boy's neck, sniffs again and the ache becomes sharp like his heart has cracked wide open releasing something he thinks must be…joy. He turns his head so his whiskers don't scrape the tender cheek and it is then he hears the metal tab of a semi-automatic click into position behind him. His eyes narrow as he looks to Margot. Gratitude is indeed fleeting…

"I'm sorry, Will. They got here just before you did."

Will knows Margot had no choice as he looks into Leo's face. The boy is the perfect leverage and the perfect bait. He wonders how long it took for the FBI to figure it all out. Probably until yesterday.

"Hello, Jack." Will says, adopting a flat artificial tone he hopes masks the regret he feels.

He still faces Margot his back to the door where Jack and the slew of agents he no doubt brought with him stand with weapons raised. Margot's shoulders slump in resignation. Will closes his eyes as he rubs his head against the soft curls for the first and last time.

"Hello, Will. You came alone?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"He's not coming, Jack. All you have…is me."

"We can still make a deal."

Will hands off the boy to Margot, noting the pained twisting of her lips as she blinks back tears. The huge eyes move from Will to the door behind him. Will nods slightly. He raises his hands over his head and turns slowly to Jack.

Jack brought two agents with him, at least into the bedroom. Will figures several more have been stationed around the estate and its property. He locks his fingers behind his head and waits.

"Are you armed?"

"I wouldn't bring a weapon…in here." Will glares at Jack, eyes flicking to the sleek black Sauer in his hands.

"On the floor, Will. You know the drill." Jack's tone is hard, detached. There is decidedly more grey than black in the goatee and his head is almost entirely white.

"Can we do this in another room? Away from…my son?"

Jack considers his request, fingers still wrapped around the trigger, gun still leveled at Will's head. He nods towards the door.

"I can do that. You know, Will, this doesn't have to be the last time you see him. All you have to do is cooperate."

Will reaches the door and steps into the hall, eyes on the large bay windows that line the walls, shimmering stained glass the colors of peeled citrus and summer skies.

"I don't plan on seeing him again, Jack."

Will charges for the windows as gunfire rings out. He leaps, crashes through the panes of wood and glass and he is falling with the ashes that descend from the fiery furnace above.

Glossy feathers the color of night sting his cheeks and Will spits the plumes from his lips as gusts of fiery wind blast his face.

My dear tortured Will. Our garden eludes you still. Can't you see your season in hell prevails by clinging to dark mists and sad fairy tales?

Young Hannibal's voice coos in his ears as the tiny tines erupt along his spine. Will shuts his eyes, feels the sting of tears on his lashes as much from the bracing wind as the searing pain in his chest. His words come haltingly as he struggles to breathe.

The desires… of the Fates are beyond… our control, even Zeus… must abide by the dark mists they forebode.

It is in your illusions you see the fires of hell, the heart already knows where it desires to dwell.

You… are an illusion, a fantasy of blood, breath, and desire. No more real than the flames of my fire.

And yet your lips would suffer endless cries if I would feast upon that banquet quivering between rapturous thighs…

Will feels his body lurch sideways and he opens his eyes to find his face nestled in white feathers, not black. His arms grip winged Daniel's naked waist as the Ducati winds and wails along the asphalt. He holds his own wings flat against his back, shoulders tense with the weight. He shifts his legs, the muscles tight and sore from holding them up and away from the hot exhaust.

Daniel dips a wing and looks over his shoulder at Will.

The devil is not as black as he appears, Will. All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream…

Dreams prepare us for waking life…

"Will…" Hannibal's voice vibrates in his ears and he lifts his head from Hannibal's back, warm leather sticking to his cheeks. "We're here…"

Will immediately slips off the seat, legs as flimsy as rubber and he stumbles over to a tree, the smell of manure wafts through his nose and he hears running water, a stream, somewhere close by. He watches winged Daniel dismount from the Ducati and disappear into the grove of fig trees, his grey wolf in tow.

"I'll have to check the stitches again. Fresh bandages…"

Hannibal steps closer and Will watches in stunned confusion as he adjusts his tie. Will stands in the dining room in Hannibal's house in Baltimore. He glances at Boucher's *Leda and the Swan* over the decorously set table and hears Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No 1.* Will tugs at his lapels as Hannibal pulls out his chair from his usual place. He gestures for Will to do the same.

I took the liberty of selecting the wine this time. I hope you don't mind.

Will shakes his head, unbuttons his jacket and takes his seat. He looks up to the empty chair across from him.

Where's Daniel?

He's right here. Hannibal says pointing to the serving tray of braised loin exquisitely tied off with rings of scarlet ribbon trailing delicate bows and surrounded by a garland of white gardenias.

Will stares numbly at the lightly browned meat in the tray, femur sticking out of the center. Hannibal picks up a carving knife, pauses with blade in hand.

That is what you wanted, isn't it? For me to save you?

Not like this…

Hannibal pushes a pretty plate decorated with petite fleur de lis across the table. Will examines the dark red flesh arranged on a bed of greens and fresh parsley. The dark flesh is not meat, it is an organ. A heart.

You can keep this part. Hannibal says snapping his napkin. *Wipe your face. You're bleeding again…*

Hannibal dangles a white towel in front of Will, curious as to where Will has gone in his head and a little concerned at his apparent lack of control. Hannibal has no idea how long Will has been off on his retreat. Perhaps from the moment he sat on the bike.

"Will." Hannibal pauses, "Wipe your face. You're bleeding again. I'll have a look when Daniel gets here with more supplies.

"Okay." Will takes the towel, grateful for something to hold and kneads the soft terry keeping his distance.

He blinks at Hannibal, pushes off from the tree and edges around to the Ducati Hannibal parked in front of the tree. He eases his body back, rests against the sturdy bike and wipes absently at his face, willing himself to take regular breaths he counts off in his head.

He watches Hannibal carefully while he shines the light of his cell phone over his medical kit. He moves his left arm stiffly, probably due to Will's bandages. He doesn't seem to be in any pain at all. A shot of lidocaine and he appears almost good as new. Despite the blood loss, he managed to get them here.

The night sky is aglow to the east of them signaling the slaughter house still burns. The wailing of sirens sounds in the distance, faintly but distinctly.

Will presses the terrycloth against his wound as he shuffles his recent rush of dreams around and around, a calliope of conversations and images that twine through his mind. The associations came unbidden, seemingly spontaneous but Will knows from his therapy with Daniel that he interacts with fractured pieces of himself in his dreams. His subconscious is speaking to him very, very loudly or…he really is losing his mind.

"I'm here." Jack removes the phone that has become a blister against his ear.

Jack Crawford looks out the window of the Mercedes at the devastation as he steers over to grass, maneuvering around the emergency vehicles and the *Polizia* and firemen on foot. The abandoned property is a zoo, well Jack thinks, it is a slaughter house that smolders, pops, and hisses in front of his windshield. Full grown pigs wander the lot and as Jack lifts his eyes toward the surrounding hills he sees more of them caught in the glow of the waning fires and waving flashlights. An impromptu corral has been erected to contain the hogs animal control has caught while they stalk the rest.

Jack rubs at prickly whiskers he can't remember trimming last. He thinks he has barely glanced at a mirror in days. Probably better that he doesn't.

He turns back to the ruined slaughter house. Nearly half the main building remains standing, but the rest has been reduced to smoldering ash, concrete rubble and twisted scaffolding. The burned out husk of a blown out vehicle sits smoking at the rear of the building, tires melted and covered in soot. Jack sighs as his fingers grasp the door handle. Time to get to work.

A tall figure wearing an FBI jacket emerges from the smoky lot holding a phone to his ear. Zee trots up to the Mercedes, slips his phone into his jacket. Jack pushes open the door and climbs out, wrinkles his nose immediately. The smell of smoke is bad enough but the air is filled with the stench of burned flesh as well. He looks toward the center of the building where the actual pit is… was and wonders how many hogs perished inside.

"The villa in Impruneta has been secured. Jimmy is heading that... alone. Got the names of the people in charge of the…arson scene so I know who to talk to?"

Zee wipes at his nose with his free hand, the other gripping a clip board.

"Got it. Interpol is here. I can join Jimmy in Impruneta when I'm done here. There's not much we can do or see here except gawk."

"This…is unreal. What a mess. Took a lot of pictures for me?"

Zee pats the camera hanging from his neck. "Right here, boss. I guess there is some pretty sensitive…evidence in Impruneta?"

"You could say that. I'd like to keep it quiet for as long as possible."

"It doesn't look good for Will, does it?"

"No…but I'll let the evidence speak for him, or against him. He's been keeping a lot close to the vest and what I see here raises more questions than answers them."

"Jack…I've made a preliminary report for you and um….this is not just arson. There were bodies in the slaughter house."

"Identifiable?"

"Well, it looks like the pigs dragged some pieces out with them…"

"The pigs…Do we know who they belong to?"

"Um…somebody, consensus is the Paolini but who knows why, brought a corral full of them to the slaughter house and dumped them there. The truck that brought them is gone, but it left tracks. Tracks are going to be difficult to analyze. Pigs ran all over the place trying to get out, dragging body parts and all…"

Jack thinks he has a pretty good idea of what might have gone down. Mason's tragic accident in Baltimore involved pigs, too. He hasn't been able to get Will or Clayton all night. And Hannibal is not answering Will's other phone. It is clear the Paolini provided the pigs and perhaps they provided more than that. Jack shudders inwardly at the thought of finding Will's remains, or Clayton's for that matter in the ruins. Doctor Clayton must have lost his mind…Will's is already gone.

As for Hannibal, Jack will need a positive ID, an unequivocally positive ID.

"Who, besides the Paolini, would dump a load of pigs at an abandoned falling apart slaughter house?" Zee asks, interrupting Jack's train of thought.

"Mason Verger, that's who. Any sign of him?"

"Verger? In Florence? What the…?"

“Focus, Zee.”

“He uh, might be one of the deceased. They pulled out a wheelchair from the least damaged part of the main building and there’s a charred SUV inside the building...and get this. The SUV is the likely cause of the fire.”

“Can you read the plates?”

“There’s some damage, but I’ll be able to trace it.”

He doubts Hannibal is among the dead. Verger might have torched the place to hide evidence, but he wouldn’t have left his wheelchair. The fire was Hannibal’s doing. Jack half expects to hear they found a BBQ pit next. He rubs his burning eyes thinking he sounds like Will.

“We can walk over to where they have spread out the remains on a tarp. Identification is going to take a while.”

Zee gestures toward a group of jackets, *Polizia* and FBI, and begins to walk, Jack right behind him. He hands the clip board to Jack.

“Too burned?” Jack asks taking the clip board.

“Too…eaten.”

“By the pigs?”

“Yeah. And there’s evidence of some kind of torture chamber in the pit. Ropes suspended over the pit. A lot of the actual mechanisms are destroyed but the control panel is not as damaged.”

“This…is all going to take a lot of time.” Jack’s grimace is grim as he surveys the report.

“There is one body that wasn’t consumed by fire. Found in adjoining office space above the pit.”

“No idea who?”

“Facial recognition won’t be ideal but the prints are running through Interpol now…and us.”

“What’s with the face?”

“Eyes are gouged out. Looks like there was a struggle. Found a bloody scalpel. Lots of blood on the floor, some of it probably belongs to the other guy.”

“Or guys.” Jack says as he follows Zee to the tarp.

“You don’t think Will is one of the bodies?”

Jack shakes his head. “I hope not. Although, it is entirely possible Hannibal lit this place up in a rage if Will is one of those bodies.”

Jack’s gut tells him Will is not on the tarp, but he would like some tangible evidence to ease his mind.

The dismembered body parts are difficult to recognize. They have been ravaged by teeth, gnawed to the bones, and the tissue trails from the broken bones, clumps of ripped sinew and webs of shredded veins. The skulls are eviscerated, though it appears two were brunettes and one was a blonde. It is obvious the bodies were pulled apart, not hacked.

“We don’t know if they were eaten…alive or not, do we?”

“We don’t. And we don’t know if these were the intended victims or not. I mean, there had to be more people involved than four.”

“Agreed.”

“You think Will and Lecter had something to do with this.”

“I *know* they had something to do with this. A lot of something. This…was a trap for Hannibal, at least Verger thought so. Hannibal had other plans.”

“And Will?”

“Part of the design, but his design or Hannibal’s…I don’t know.”

“If they got away, where did they go? Did they leave together?”

Jack looks out over the fields that surround the property, squints at the line of pine trees and the shadowy terrain. FBI agents and *Polizia* officers are trapesing through the parking lot and the field.

“Why are they walking a grid in the dark?”

“Gunshots fired.”

“Did you find bullets?”

“Not yet, but the 911 caller heard shots. A lot of shots.”

“I think they would have left together. Common enemy at least for a little while.”

“Mason’s reward.” Zee shakes his head as the jigsaw puzzle pieces shift, “You knew?”

Jack nods gravely. “Will knew about it. He said he wanted to catch Hannibal. I…want to catch Hannibal.”

“So you…looked the other way.”

“I didn’t know about this specifically. I knew that Will was planning something and I…let him run with it. He’s running still.”

“We have to catch them both?”

“It’s beginning to look that way. Will and Hannibal have their grudges, but they could put those grudges aside temporarily if there was a benefit to cooperating.”

“And Mason trying to kill them qualifies. This seems like unfinished business to me.” Zee says catching Jack’s eyes. “Mason’s *accident* in Baltimore?”

“Only the tip of an enormous iceberg.” Jack huffs.

“Agent Crawford!”

Jack and Zee turn to the voice, Italian accent quite prominent, and watch Inspector Santo approach. Jack sighs, a gruff growl as his fingers trace the lid of the container of antacids in his jacket.

“Glad you are finally here.” Santo says extending his hand.

Jack grips it, relieved Santo isn’t adversarial…yet.

“I’m getting briefed right now.” Jack says, nodding at Zee. “You’ve already met Agent Zeller?”

“Yes. At Boboli. Any idea what went on here?”

“Plenty of ideas. A lot of questions.”

“Where’s Will Graham? I thought he might have come with you.”

Jack knows Santo did not expect Will to be with him. Jack thinks Santo’s approach not the most effective way to play this, but if he wants to run with the innocent routine, then so be it.

“I haven’t been able to reach Will. Thankfully, he’s not here.”

“Could he have been?”

“That’s something we are looking into.”

“Looks like somebody’s reward backfired.”

“Bigtime.”

“You had no idea Graham was up to anything?”

Jack smiles a very tight smile. “Will…is always up to something. That’s part of why he’s so good at what he does.”

Santo coughs, stuffs his hands in his trouser pockets. “I think your bloodhound snapped his leash. What do you think?”

“I think I’ll see what the evidence bears out. Things are not always what they appear where Lecter is concerned.”

A quick unconvinced nod from Santo. “Talked to *Capitano* Pazzi today?”

“No. Have you?”

Santo shakes his head. “This…*stinks*, *Signore* Crawford. And I don’t mean the pig shit.”

“Get used to it” Jack says looking at his vibrating phone. It’s Price. “I have to take this. Excuse me.”

Jack wanders away from the tarp and Santo, handing off the clip board to Zee, who is quickly immersed in it as he walks away leaving Santo to stare at the tarp.

“What have you got, Jimmy?”

“Oh…my…God, Jack. I don’t know where to begin…” Price breathes into the phone.

“Let me tell you what I want to know and you tell me if you found anything to confirm it.”

“Let her rip.”

“Will was there.”

“Confirmed. He was in the kitchen, the dining room, the master bedroom, and the bathroom. He left a tumbler of whiskey in the living room, we collected prints from the piano, too and they are a match. Uh, he was also downstairs, Jack.”

“In the…morgue?”

“Yes. Hannibal, too, obviously. No attempt to wipe down anything. Will is all over the bathtub and…the bed.”

“The bed. Any…sexual activity?”

“No. The shower curtain is missing. It’s an elaborate bathroom, a walk in marble shower, and the curtain was pretty much decoration, not functional. The shower is dry, so I’m thinking he used the shower curtain to transport a body.”

“Wrap it up nice and snug after washing it so it had a minimum of trace evidence attached to it. Hannibal bathed Will, but Will wasn’t conscious when he did. He took the time to clean him up so we couldn’t track him there.”

“So how did you find it?”

“A little blonde bird told me.”

“Du Maurier. She screwed him.”

“At least figuratively.” Jack says ignoring the muffled snigger at the other end. “If Hannibal washed the evidence from Ruggerio and Will to protect himself, did he do so believing Du Maurier would keep quiet? Or was all this misdirection?”

“She wants her immunity deal, Jack. She gave him up ‘cause you left her no choice.”

“Maybe. Maybe she wants me to think that. Or that’s exactly what Hannibal expected her to do.”

“She’s matching wits with Hannibal? She’d better be pretty good.”

“She’s managed for at least a year with him, probably longer. But, she’s matching wits with Will, too.”

“What if Hannibal and Will are playing her?”

“Then she is going to be in a world of hurt. There’s no evidence that she has been colluding with Hannibal at the villa?”

“Just her hat minus some eagle feathers. She could have left it here anytime, or Hannibal stole it.”

“Sounds like everybody’s playing the frame game. Multiple crimes, multiple suspects. Difficult to indict and nearly impossible for a jury to convict. Very…complicated.”

“And very smart.”

“And that’s just a bonus for Hannibal. He’s got an endgame in mind. So does Du Maurier.”

“And Will?”

“Will is a reluctant player, late to the game, but he earned his seat at the table. I know better than to make quick judgments with regard to Will.”

Jack decides Price, and Zeller to a greater extent, already know too much. Du Maurier’s role in this has to remain in a tight loop. So does Mason’s role and Pazzi’s, at least for a while longer. Jack understands he has some tough decisions to make and the more informed he is the better.

Hannibal has orchestrated quite an intricate design this time. The design feels different to Jack. The design is not logical. The tableaux of Luciano and Lucia were convoluted, burdened with too many literary interpretations pointing to too many possibilities. Ruggerio’s tableau seemed more straightforward, but the literary connections were atypical of Hannibal. Jack thinks he is possibly seeing something of an emerging signature from Will. Or Will has prompted a change in Hannibal’s pathology.

Who is influencing whom?

Both the tableaux and the Paolini killings in the alley were imbued with one common characteristic. Beneath the varnish of allusions lies the most revealing connection of all. Emotion. One emotion in particular; passion. These were highly personal kills. These were not affronts to Hannibal’s sense of propriety, nor were they selected for a recipe although Hannibal did not let the meat go to waste.

As much as Will’s interpretations make sense, it occurs to Jack that Will read a code within a code. An exclusive patois that only Hannibal and Will speak. They have been communicating all along, each of them hopelessly obsessed with the other. Two predators. Two possible outcomes, Jack thinks.

They will turn on each other, or hunt together.

No wonder Du Maurier is trying to get away. Her status in the pack has changed, and not for the better.

“…and it looks like he kept both twins down there, but he might have killed only one of them.”

“Only one?” Jack grunts, hoping Price didn’t notice he wasn’t paying attention.

“Yes. I found bits and pieces of one of them. In the meat grinder.”

“Which one?”

“Lucia.”

Jack rolls his eyes. “And the meal?”

“Uh…still working on that, but the menu seems to be consistent with ground meat. Ravioli. There’s a heart on one plate, partially eaten.”

“Didn’t we account for Lucia’s and Luciano’s hearts?”

“Uh huh, and so this is an anonymous donor.”

“The table had three place settings. Will, Hannibal, and…any evidence to support Du Maurier?”

“Lipstick on two wine glasses. More blonde hair on the rug. Running fingerprints. The two larger plates indicate dinner was shared by two, but there are three dessert plates. And several wine glasses and empty bottles of some very expensive stuff…”

“I know. Had themselves quite a party.”

“A reunion, Jack.” Price says softly, “Did you notice the place setting and the décor?”

“I did. Very romantic.”

“And the charcoals in the living room? I…was speechless.”

“Stay that way. Any blonde hair in the bedroom?”

“Not yet. You’re wondering if Du Maurier is your accomplice or Hannibal’s.”

“She is neither. She is an opportunist. Any progress on that account in the Cayman’s?”

“Still running that, but I should know something soon. It’s nice to have friends in warm places.”

“You sorted the drawings?”

“Yes, no dates on them so I sorted by…theme I guess you could call it.”

“Any drawings of Du Maurier?”

“Not one. We have cityscapes of Florence, recreations of his home in Baltimore…”

“His bedroom in Baltimore.”

“Yeah…and all the drawings of Will or his likeness have been sorted into categories. But Jack…”

“What?”

“I’m categorizing purely by content association. The *Iliad*, Saint Sebastian, and so on. Hannibal’s associations…”

“I understand. His thought process is a mystery. But Will recognized it when he saw it. He must have looked at them.”

“I think so. There’s a drawing of his house in Wolf Trap. Left on top.”

“I saw that, too.”

“Will didn’t pose for any of these. It’s all Hannibal.”

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford.

Will's not alone.

No, he's not.

“I know.” Jack says grinding his jaw. With a memory like Hannibal’s, Will doesn’t have to.

Jack is beginning to think that no matter what evidence Price is able to extract from the villa, there will never be enough to completely erase his doubts about either Du Maurier or Will. He is convinced that Du Maurier is motivated by jealousy. A very primal sort of jealousy that, by contrast, he sees no evidence of in Will. He decides to ponder on the implications of that later.

Hannibal had left traces of Du Maurier in the tableaux. He discovered the GPS tracker on her and used it to his advantage. Jack thinks Hannibal might have been manipulating both Du Maurier and Will and has left trails leading to both of them. He has made damn sure that Du Maurier’s trail is as obvious as breadcrumbs. Du Maurier has made sure Jack is aware of the trail intended for Will. But is it?

The question is how much does Hannibal know, or thinks he knows about Du Maurier and Will. Hannibal can extrapolate, can manipulate, but he does not coerce. Influence is most effective when the patient is unaware Du Maurier had said. Will had been very aware and had succumbed. How aware is Du Maurier? Jack thinks of their conversation at the restaurant.

Suppose when you arrive at Hannibal’s home, you find him there?

You honestly believe that likely?

Each of them is lonely, Agent Crawford, in their own way. They understand each other. Who among us does not desire to be understood? Which of us would not be seduced by that kind of acceptance?

Hannibal manipulated insight with Will, pushed him into situations to see what he would do. Will dissociated sometimes.

Situations Mr. Graham willingly exposed himself to.

Did he? Or was Hannibal’s influence so profound, so insidious that Will can’t help it?

If that is the case, Agent Crawford, he is already lost to you

How do I know you aren’t already lost?

You don’t. But I am the one offering to take you to Hannibal in exchange for immunity. What did Mr. Graham ask for?

Will has asked Jack for nothing. Du Maurier wants Jack to believe she is seeking to escape from Hannibal, but it is just as likely that Hannibal approved of the ruse. Another possibility is that Hannibal already knows her intentions and, believing she intends to betray him, has worked that into his design. As Jack thinks about the evidence at the villa, he thinks Will’s appearance in Florence ignited a war between Du Maurier and Hannibal. Will may have not been aware initially, but he is aware now. He has had to rethink his own design because of it, make adjustments and… concessions. Again.

Jack rubs at the scruff on his neck. Will saved Hannibal from Mason in Baltimore. If Will got himself abducted, Hannibal's sense of reciprocity would have compelled him to return the favor. Will could have sacrificed himself to catch Hannibal, let Mason have him this time, but those drawings, the shared meal, the DNA in the bedroom and the tub all indicate that Will had not been able to do it. The smoking ruins of slaughter house attest to that.

Will had been drugged at Boboli. He may not know what happened, but Jack is sure Du Maurier does. Will may not even remember being at Hannibal's villa. Or being downstairs. Or in the bathtub. Jack realizes these are an incredible number of things to be unaware of, but a jury will not be swayed by evidence alone. Will's exceptional looks carry considerable influence as long as he doesn't open his mouth.

Will could have managed an insanity plea, could manage it still, if he brings Hannibal to Jack. Pazzi's hand in this remains vague. If he is the one who brought Will to Mason and escaped the blood bath, Will and Hannibal will hunt him down like prey.

If Jack can locate Pazzi, he will find Hannibal and Will. And Will will have to make his choice once and for all. In the meantime, Jack can follow up on Du Maurier. She may prove useful. Hannibal seems to think so.

"Anything else, Jack?"

"What was it Will said about Dante's *Vita Nuova*?"

"A dead end. No connection between the birthdays of the Paolini twins and Dante's divine clock."

"I figured as much. But he mentioned it was a love poem? Something about eating your lover's heart?"

"Dante wrote the poem, for the love of his life, Beatrice. He uses the imagery and symbolism of her eating Dante's heart from the hand of love as an expression of his desire for her to return his love."

"Meaning that Dante had wished his heart be torn from him and figuratively eaten. A desire to be completely consumed by her."

"Or meaning that he was already consumed. It is a declaration of love, unrequited. A plea."

"Will said the eating of her lover's heart foreshadows her death. Beatrice was dead?"

"I thought you were up on Italian lit." Price pauses, but the ensuing silence prompts him to continue. "He was smitten, hardly knew her. She ends up dying tragically young a few years after he wrote that poem so it seems prescient, but it wasn't. There is a literary tradition of using that imagery as a foreshadowing of death. In the *Decameron*…"

"I think I've heard enough."

"You think there is some significance to eating the heart left on the dining room table?"

"There's always significance to everything Hannibal does."

And everything Will does. Will may have been tossing the reference to Jack as misdirection, but in doing so, he had let on that he was familiar with the poem. Will had failed to explain it the way Price had just now and Jack thinks that a particularly telling omission. Hannibal is intimately familiar with Dante and it is possible he had shoved a plateful of declaration right under Will's nose at the dinner table.

And Will had partaken of his lover's heart. Unrequited no more. Or did he want Hannibal to believe that?

"Thanks, Jimmy. I'll let you get back to work and ride that friend of yours in the Cayman's a little harder."

Jack immediately regrets his phrasing as Price sniggers again into the phone. "I'll do my best, Jack."

"Zee!" Jack waves Zee away from the tarp.

"I want to go over every line of that report. And I want to see the body from the offices."

"They are bringing it down now, Jack. And the ID is positive for a Cordell Doemling. Mason Verger's nurse."

"Nurse, huh. I wonder what that is a euphemism for."

"I've got his pedigree up on my phone."

Jack glances around and spots Santo doing the same. Jack would prefer his discussion with Zee remain private.

"Let's talk in my car."

Jack abruptly turns on his heels, freezes as he notices a bottle of something sitting on the tarp with an FBI label tied to it.

"What is that?" Jack walks over for a better look.

He retrieves his gloves from his pocket and picks up the bottle of champagne. "Cristal…" Jack mutters, "Where did you find this?"

"In the grass by the edge of the parking lot. There's the bloody towel found beside it." Zee points to a pile of terrycloth also tagged.

"Anything else you find by it?"

"Traces of gasoline on the asphalt. Blood. Jack…there's blood all over this place."

"But not next to a bottle of extremely expensive champagne. And a bloody towel."

"What are you thinking?"

Jack grins at his tangible proof of life.

“They cleaned their wounds with this.” Jack cradles the bottle in his palm, “I’ll bet you find two sets of prints on the bottle and two blood samples from the towel. Hannibal’s and Will’s.”

“They made it outside. Both of them.” Zee nods, half smiles, “The gunshots. Who was firing at them?”

“Who else? Pazzi.”

Jack sets the bottle back on the tarp and heads for his Mercedes. Zee has to walk at a clip to keep up.

Chapter End Notes

Notes on Chapter 81
Young Hannibal and Will mimic the style of the Samuel Butler translation of Homer’s Iliad, found on the Project Gutenberg website.
Daniel quotes from Dante’s Paradiso, Canto II
Will and Hannibal quote directly and loosely from Authur Rimbaud, Season in Hell. The selected verses are from Night in Hell.
Will repeats a verse from William Blake’s Broken Love

Coming up: Hannibal decides that their honest conversation cannot wait. Will disagrees. Jack receives an anonymous tip about Lounds. Daniel veers ever closer to the event horizon of chaos.

Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

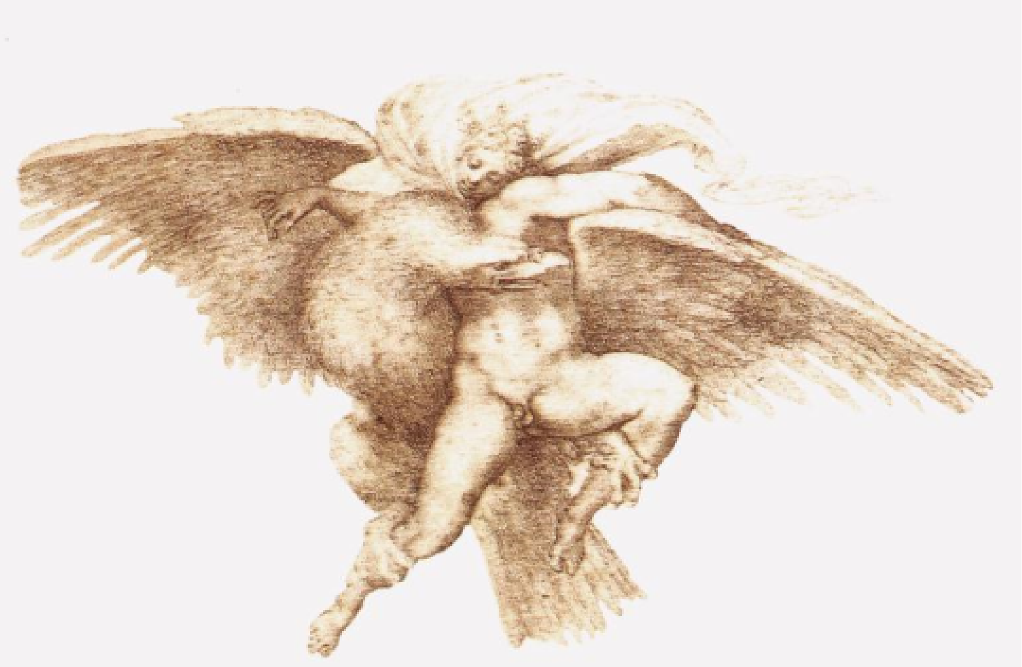
> Hannibal decides that their honest conversation cannot wait. Will disagrees, initially. Jack receives an anonymous tip about Lounds and Du Maurier.
>
> “We suffer…the sins of omission…Will…”
>
> Hannibal’s head inclines as though an invisible cord pulls him there, to inhale the scent of Will, his mouth so close to Will’s lips he can almost taste them. Will turns his head further into the bark that scrapes his head, away from him. Hannibal wonders if he turns to deny Hannibal, or himself.
>
> “…because to speak truth to one another is unrecognizable or…unwelcome.” He practically presses the words into the hollow of Will’s aching cheek.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 82

Hannibal decides that their honest conversation cannot wait. Will disagrees, initially. Jack receives an *anonymous* tip about Lounds and Du Maurier.



Rape of Ganymede, Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1553

If one chaste love, if one divine compassion,

If one destiny is equal for two lovers,

I f one hard fate of the one is felt by the other,

If one spirit, if one will guides two hearts;

If one soul in two bodies makes itself eternal,

Lifting both to heaven with a single wing,

If Love in one blow and one golden arrow

The hearts in two chests can burn and tear;

If the one loves the other and neither loves himself,

With one pleasure and one delight, to such a measure

That one and the other desire to reach a single end:

Thousands and thousands would not make a hundredth

Of such a knot of love, or of such a faith: And only anger could break and untie it.

If One Chaste Love, Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1532

Hannibal's phone lies propped against a rock, its screen the singular source of illumination in the dense thicket of twisted trees and suspended shadows where the artificial light of Florence does not reach. There are not many trees along this road, but this stretch of weathered blacktop winds around what remains of a pine forest cleared long ago for orchards and crops and the grazing of cows. Farmers often left sections of forest to separate their fruit and olive groves from their vineyards. Will knows by the stench of the manure that wafts downwind that it is definitely cows that usually share the field of spent sunflowers but they have been corralled elsewhere this evening.

If he peers out from the grove of fig trees he can see swatches of his inferno. Its devastated landscape smolders and burns beyond the twisted branches and the field of withered sunflowers. The smattering of snow that trailed the grey wolf reveals no blades of green and Will figures the winter of his discontent is not over. He has removed some of Patroclus' armor for the moment but the shield remains firmly in place. Achilles is known for his…reveling.

A thrust of the pitchfork, a drop of fire.

Will leans against the black and silver Ducati eyes on Hannibal. The brown hair Will cannot get used to falls over a forehead creased in concentration and beaded with perspiration as Hannibal kneels upon the ground on one knee, knapsack at his side, shoving the excess bandages into it. There is a quiet discipline about him, an economy of movement that preserves energy while disguising injury. Ever the predator and always conscious of being observed.

Observing Hannibal outside like this reminds him of that singular occasion when Hannibal had come out to his house in Wolf Trap to sketch. So accustomed to seeing Hannibal indoors, he had taken pleasure in watching Hannibal navigate the uncompromising elements of his world. The predator had been removed from his familiar comforts, no longer surrounded by polished teak, luxuriant leather and cool metal. Will had enjoyed the Hannibal who had emerged that day in the wild and unkempt woods encircling his little boat upon its sea of grass and fog.

But fog dissipates with the morning light as do dreams.

He has held on to that memory, carries it around like strand of sad ribbon too dear to let go. He clutches a lot of ribbons as he walks through the memory palace he shares with Hannibal. He paces within its cavernous hall, white knuckled fists clenched around his faded ribbons feet unwilling to move any further than the foyer of 5 Chandal Square. He eyes the door to the kitchen, the entrance to the salon, and of course the stairs…the prospect of adding more rooms too daunting, too uncertain. Everywhere he turns there is no exit only smoke and shadow…

I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it.

Didn't I?

Will wants that gift, has all but accepted it. But, and there is always a caveat with Hannibal it seems, Hannibal sees their shared rooms through a quite different lens. Will's feet shift restlessly and as he polishes the chrome of the Ducati with the seat of his pants he tries to imagine that lens. Tentatively, he inches toward the stairs revisiting the last time he climbed out of their bed of lies, his heart rent in half as always with Hannibal, knowing he should run, but wanting to stay. He sees himself lying on his back in deep purple satin so sinuous he seems to float upon ink. The sheets are cinched about his hips so Hannibal's hand can rest upon his stomach. He watches his eyes close and lips part in an indulgent smile as the manicured fingers stroke his navel and pause for a pluck and a pinch.

Nothing will be the same after tonight. Are you anticipating regret?

Are you?

Regret for the life I would leave behind? Yes.

But you will always have your memory palace. Is Abigail in that palace?

There are many rooms in that palace, Will, and many of them are filled with regret. And I would that no more rooms be filled with it.

Muted notes of truth had fallen from Hannibal's lips that night, but Will had not been listening. Will is listening now and hears the anticipation of other regrets in his words as Hannibal commits the sins of omission with every word, a melancholy melody playing strains of a broken and sad *adagio* as Hannibal had plucked and pinched. Will thinks of playing Hannibal's harpsichord, the two of them sitting side by side their fingers tripping across the ivory, plucking chords of black keys and white, the notes of lies and truth struck simultaneously. The symphony they write grows ever more *fortissimo* and…harmonious.

A wisp of whiskey seems to distill upon his tongue as Will looks upon the bed in Baltimore through the haze of his inferno's flames. He can almost feel Hannibal's warm skin brushing his cheek, can almost smell their sweat laced with the tang of sex upon the fingers threading through his tangled curls as they lay beneath the satin and blankets bathed in the glow of firelight.

I could leave now without sacrifices and without regrets. Forgiveness for past transgressions given freely. Could you?

I'm not seeking forgiveness. I feel the need to follow this through.

They had not been speaking of the same transgressions. Will had not followed through and had received forgiveness anyway; he sees Hannibal's forgiveness every time he takes off his clothes. He glances down at his open shirt, Daniel's shirt, hopelessly ripped and hanging in blood stained tatters. The scar gleams silver along smooth skin and he looks up and away, frustrated with the images it summons.

Hot breath hisses along his neck and his cheek tics with the pricking of a single talon beside the cut.

No longer undecided and indifferent are you, Will?

No…

Will shifts his weight against the bike, glances at Hannibal, wonders how long he will wait before exploiting the hallucinating to his advantage. If he doesn't, well…that would be a first. It would appear his imagination is managing expectations for him as it is.

The flames of your inferno burn too hot, our garden cannot grow among its ashes. Hannibal's voice whispers.

I'm having trouble picturing what kind of garden grows from broken clay.

Will shifts uneasily against the bike as he looks over his shoulder, eyes flicking from the actual Hannibal to squint into the darkness and the creature breathing down his neck behind him.

Trust is a particularly hardy rose once it takes root. But, the seeds are delicate and small.

Microscopic…

With an insouciant shrug of his shoulders he turns his head from the rustling of the feathers at his back and the scrape of talons across the leather seat of the bike. But his infernal companion will not be ignored. The seductive hissing tickles his ears as a glossing of feathers glides between Will's legs. He shudders; tensing with the stirring of flesh inside his trousers.

Truth begins to bloom in our garden.

That's not truth blooming…

In an effort to dull the pleasant pulses, he bites his sore lip, but the plumes press insistently, ever persistent and the pulsing becoming a delicious throb.

Isn't it?

Cool and slick, the serpent's tail coils around his legs and its wings descend like a cloak of velvet. Caught in the crush of claw and feathers, Will is momentarily blinded, lost in silk and blackness and the sound of thunderous wings.

He feels the tug of talons, they sink into the flesh of his shoulders and he is hoisted up above the grove of fig trees. His legs kick wildly, helplessly as Hannibal and the Ducati shrink from view and Will and his massive eagle ascend into the night sky. The stars explode in a brilliant flash above them and Will grasps at the scaly legs, frantic to hold on.

I see fear in those fair eyes, Will. Do you trust me?

Will doesn't answer. He knows he's hallucinating but his body does not, and the sensation of being lifted off the ground and swept up into the sky seems real enough. The red rimmed eyes regard him closely as he desperately pulls himself upward so he can wrap tired arms around its sturdy neck. He feels the tip of its beak shred through his clothes.

No…don't.

Life to my thoughts within your heart is given. My words begin to breathe upon your breath.

The verse spoken into his hair sounds familiar, but the prick of memory is quickly lost like a gust of wind.

Like to the moon am I, that cannot shine alone…

He twists his suspended legs in a vain attempt to repel the invasive beak ripping through fabric even as its cool sharp edge draws reluctant hisses. He clings to the neck in fretful resignation; watches the shreds of bloody shirt then trousers billow like banners in the wind and disappear into clouds. Indignation flushes hot over his skin a brief searing heat that turns quickly to icy shivers as they swoop and dive, chilled to the bone though they fly beneath a scorching sun.

Awareness is a frightful thing. And Will is very aware his own mind has sent him into the heavens with his infernal companion, this soaring hallucination another fractured message from his subconscious. It is the fear of not knowing where his mind is taking him that has set his limbs trembling like brittle twigs bracing a winter wind. He peers out from the silken plumes and finds himself looking down upon a sapphire sea sprinkled with white and crimson sails.

Do you see, Will? Your bed of lies rests upon a sea of deception.

My fantasies… Will speaks into the downy breast as they drift in the warmth of ocean breezes.

Not just yours. You created a fantasy for me. I can strip from you satin sheet or chaste white chiton, but I have never really seen you naked, have I?

God has seen his Adam naked….

Will locks his arms around the thick neck and looks down at the shiny black talons that hold him in their grip. The grip around his ribs and stomach tightens as they swoop lower to glide over the sparkling surf.

God has seen his own image in Adam. Hardly the same thing.

God created the image. He created the clay. God gets…got what he had coming to Him.

God creates. He whispers. And he waits.

Let's not forget He destroys. Will says, face swathed in feathers. *I have killed. We…have killed together. You saw what was left of me bleeding out on your kitchen floor.*

I did. And you are still very, very angry, Will. What is to be done about that?

Another heated hiss alights on his neck, a collar of vaporous warmth. Will kicks at air and immediately feels the tip of its sharp beak graze the back of his head to nestle in the thicket of curls there. Frustrated, he continues kicking despite the talons carefully moving along his hips then legs, gripping muscle inch by inch until closing around knees and thighs. It's a powerful grip that holds him, defying gravity as they soar; flesh and feathers twined together.

They drop in altitude suddenly and Will snatches at shiny plumes by the handful as he looks up into the blood rimmed eyes of the creature. Gathering a mouthful of curls, the great beak pulls Will's head against its downy breast and its powerful wings extend their entire breadth as they glide over the fleet of Greek triremes below.

The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. You see an inferno where there could be a garden. The cup I lift you up to bear has already passed between our lips.

The cup you would have me bear is empty.

Not empty. You refuse to drink from the cup I would share with you.

Clearly I am destined to drink the poison from it.

You see poison, but it is wine.

You…already shattered the teacup.

The pleasing hisses give way to a throaty chuckle and the huge glossy head dips just enough that Will feels his arms slipping.

Tsk. Tsk. Plenty of teacups in the cupboard. A brand new one in Tuscany…or is it Sardinia? If it is poison you desire, go then and drown in a sea of it. But beware the viper, Will, there lies your poison.

Its head jerks up, talons open wide and Will plummets toward striped sails and surging sea. Wisps of white clouds streak past as he tumbles weightless, breathless…until he smells manure mingled with the scent of pine and feels his toes curl into the cool moss covered earth beneath the grove of fig trees. He blinks the vertigo away, takes a moment to check his fly and resumes his vigil as he walks back from the pendulum swinging in his mind before his imagination can take him someplace else.

Hannibal stuffs the roll of gauze back into the med kit. He considers he has never been shot before; it is another experience from which to take some measure of instruction. He knows Will took the bullet from his flesh clean and the stitches are tight, but he had not been prepared for the tenderness, for the constant shocks from angry nerves that, despite the local anesthetic and his resolve, refuse to cooperate. Much like Will, who stubbornly leans against the Ducati with arms folded across his chest, feigning composure and actually pulling it off.

Will would lean on his freshly waxed Bentley with the same calculated casualness; or would slide his belt buckle precariously close to the buffed teak of his antique desk before settling comfortably in the supple leather chair blinking innocent blue eyes at him. But, that peculiar mix of playful provocation is absent; the lips are edged now with petulance, or something akin to petulance. Will has not been effusive with gratitude, seeming to begrudge every second he had spent with arms wrapped snugly around Hannibal's waist the entire ride, nearly stumbling in his haste to dismount. He had been hallucinating again, his imagination unfettered by the constraints of time or place. His body had been unfettered as well. Mere fabric could not conceal that at least some parts of Will had enjoyed the ride as much as Hannibal.

Hannibal smiles slightly. Certainly one part of him had.

Will's petulance and his reluctance are wearing thin and Hannibal is in no mood for it. Weary from the fight and from the injuries, minor as they are, his mind is focused on the emotional tide raging within.

Hannibal thinks his Patroclus has perhaps been left alone with his thoughts too long and grown comfortable again with his silences and his retreats. He is after all, surrounded by Greeks and… psychiatrists. *Patience*, Hannibal reminds himself.

Hannibal considers their tableaux; each of them had focused upon the heart, declarations of intentions had glared among the flares of desire if either of them dared to believe what each had left for the other to see. Like God himself, their hands had taken raw elements and had fashioned their creations from the clay as it were, dispensing judgement uncompromising in its cruelty and yet flawlessly beautiful in its execution. Will's tableau had been masterful, its message especially poignant, touching Hannibal deeply, reaching into those places only Will can reach.

Hannibal has not forgotten how wretched that reach can be. He had allowed Will to reach too far in Baltimore and Will's hand remains clenched around the weeping wound, the power to heal or to inflict more pain entirely his.

But for the lie, you would already be with me.

Though Hannibal's face remains as smooth as stone, reason and emotion collide; have been colliding since he learned Will was in Florence. It is, Hannibal thinks, a most cruel irony to despise the very thing he loves because he cannot abide the weakness within himself - cannot abide the knowledge that he would not then, and would not now, still the heart that beats mere feet away from him. After Baltimore, Hannibal had reasoned, not entirely incorrectly, that the cub had needed time to reevaluate, to reflect. For the past year Hannibal has been preparing to face a worthy adversary or embrace a worthy companion. The preparations have apparently been academic. Will is here. And there is only one way Hannibal prefers to have his heart.

Wrathful Achilles, ever aware of that inconvenient heel.

Impetuous Patroclus, whose armor does he wear?

He remains appalled and unaccepting of the *inconvenient heel* that reveals he would prefer instead to endure the wounds inflicted upon his own heart simply because the enduring is better than the regret that would surely follow were he to silence the other heart forever.

Hannibal had indulged himself in the tableau at Boboli. A shameless appeal intended only for Will, requiring him to dig beneath the veils of intimacy he has only begun to lift. As he glances at the glower marring Will’s face he thinks perhaps Will is too distracted, too preoccupied with his demon to process through the all of the associations embedded within the Boboli tableau. Will had intuitively and immediately served up Prometheus for the obtuse Uncle Jack as intended. The corresponding paintings had provided Will with physical evidence to lay before Jack, eager to believe his broken pony had not murdered a police detective. The Boboli tableau has served its purpose and Hannibal thinks, circumstances being what they are, better that Will digest the meal Hannibal served up slowly.

Someday…. perhaps Will will reach into his own memory palace to touch the room and the moment at the genesis of their current chaos, the wellspring of Hannibal’s inspiration. If Will were to revisit this moment he would recognize he had awakened in the Boboli Gardens arranged in a portrayal of Tityus, not Prometheus. Greek legend tells of Zeus chaining not one, but two titans to a rough and rocky cliff, one chained to a boulder on Kazbek Mountain where he is eventually delivered from his punishment by Hercules, the other sent to Hades, an eternal punishment from which there is no escape.

Like Dante’s Tityus frozen in ice above the cliffs of his Circle of Treachery, the significance of the unfortunate titan is locked in Will’s mind. Hannibal hopes once the flames of Will’s inferno have thawed him out Will finds himself tripping over certain intimate associations with a stolen moment of bliss they had shared one crisp winter morning, in Italian no less.

Hannibal wipes the perspiration from his brow, glancing over at the Ducati. That morning is one of Hannibal’s most cherished memories with Will and yet, there the source of his anguish and delight shifts in the shadows, leaning against his bike, sullen, defiant, and beautiful. So infuriating…his Will…

You’re reading Dante at…seven in the morning?

Inspiration is a fickle mistress. His Vita Nuova, first sonnet, do you know it?

Will had nodded and the smile that had erupted had been beatific, and Hannibal had basked in a glow brighter than the sunlight streaming across their naked flesh.

Poi la svegliava, e d’esto core ardendo, lei paventosa umilmente pascea…But Love awakened her, and of my heart, aflame, he humbly made her, fearful, taste…

Read some more…in Italian.

Will had nudged his way into Hannibal’s lap, the tousled head nestled comfortably at his hip as Hannibal had recited chapter three in its entirety while their coffee had grown cold downstairs. They had talked of Dante, of Michelangelo, and of the Renaissance conception of love. Hannibal thinks perhaps argued would be a more accurate characterization. Inspiration had struck again as the haunting notes of Beethoven’s *Ghost Trio* had hummed from the stairs during their distinguished discourse. Hannibal had taken out his drawing pad and pencils, had endured too many exasperated sighs if he remembers correctly, and had attempted to capture on two dimensions the personification of beauty draped in orchid colored satin lying next to him.

It was Rodin who said that man’s naked form belongs to no particular moment in history; it is eternal, and can be looked upon with joy…

Hannibal had pointed to the particular spot where Will should pose, or at least recline in some manifestation of cooperation, shifting his own position so his back was to the morning light streaming through the panes of snow crusted glass.

By people of all ages. Will had quickly supplied the rest of the quote. *He was talking about art in museums…*

Typical of you to restate the obvious while avoiding the salience. He was referring to the human form, the male in particular as an ideal. Eternal. Divine. A source of joy.

The arched brows had wrinkled slightly and Will had lowered his eyes to ponder the pillowcase while a delightful shade of pink had bloomed upon neck and cheeks. Extending even to chastely white shoulders.

Love becomes the creator's muse. Dante with his pen and Michelangelo with his stone. Will had said after another moment of inspecting Hannibal's linens first with eyes, then fingers.

Will…chin up please… Michelangelo quarried his own marble. Claimed he could see the figure already formed inside its bulk.

All he had to do was …chip away at it.

A wry smile had graced the supple lips, but Will had made his point, and sharply.

Dante and Michelangelo believed themselves slaves to desire, to love. Expressed their tormented souls through their respective mediums.

Love can be cruel. Beatrice never returned Dante's affection; neither did Cavalieri return Michelangelo's.

But the ideal of the beloved, beautiful. Eternal. Transcendent. An approximation of the divine they could not hold in their hands, but could experience through their art.

Then, the beauty seen is because of the beloved. Will had said, chin up and eyes down.

Yes. Hannibal had answered quietly.

The second movement of the *Ghost Trio* had begun, an achingly beautiful *largo* that begins with the melancholy whine of the cello followed by the mournful answer of the piano; notes that had evoked in Hannibal a cascade of sensual associations, the piano notes falling like rain amidst the wail of violin and cello, and Hannibal had likened the music to the touch of his fingers upon the flushed taut flesh that had rippled in response to his every caress. No wonder this woeful *adagio* had been a frequent accompaniment to their amorous forays no less because the piece had been one of Will's favorites, composed shortly after another of Will's favorite pieces, *Symphony No. 6.,* Beethoven's moving *Pastoral.* Both pieces had been written by Beethoven while in the throes of his depression after receiving news of his impending deafness.

Hannibal had found it remarkable that Will had emotionally identified with both pieces without knowing the sorrowful circumstances of their origins at the time. The poignant melody had again held Will enrapt that morning; his head had rolled to his shoulder his entire being poised to listen.

Hannibal had dropped his pencil and pad to the carpet and had rejoined Will in the bed, had stretched across the mattress to slip in beside him to draw him close, to feel the hammering of his heart beating its synchronous melody. The blue eyes had glittered bright in the morning light as

Hannibal had leaned over to brush a finger over lips still parted in surprise at the sudden advance across the satin. With a touch of his finger, moist lips had opened, acquiescent petals filled with dew and Hannibal had dipped his fingers again and again drenching them in the dew soaked mouth and rolling them over the ravenous tongue while his pulsing cock had slipped between trembling thighs to plunder the tumescence bulging below.

Tousled curls had swept across the pillowcase as Will had thrown his head back; hips and thighs undulating beneath him and Hannibal had withdrawn his fingers from the luscious mouth to moisten his dry lips, the need to taste, to consume every part of Will a maddening hunger. He had buried his face against Will's neck to breathe the scent of him, wishing to smell nothing else. That morning, the finest silk would not have felt as rapturously soft against his throbbing cock nor would any confection have tasted as sweet as the flesh that had filled his mouth as Will had turned his head and had taken Hannibal's tongue quite forcefully between his lips.

Hannibal had thrust harder, had felt the quivering of Will's erect flesh like a warm electric rod along his own and Will had folded into him, whimpering with unbridled pleasure as Hannibal's cock had stabbed between tightly clenched thighs. His fingers had found Will's mouth again and Will had dragged wet lips and teeth the length of his finger as though sliding a bow across the mournful cello. Hannibal's every muscle had seemed to constrict in anticipation and when the release had gushed over slick limbs and sweat soaked satin Will had cried out a glorious groan, Hannibal's finger still caught between grin and grimace.

Hannibal had taken Will's upturned face in his hands and had gazed into the half lidded eyes, had watched ecstasy ripple across the slackened features, overcome experiencing his own pleasures while helplessly absorbing Hannibal's at the same time. Will had come immediately after he had, spurting a hot drizzling across their stomachs, his body quaking with shudders as Hannibal had looked into the wrecked and confounded face staring up him, breathless and exquisite and… completely his.

This… Hannibal had whispered between grateful gasps while touching his lips to faltering lashes, *this is the beauty they could not hold.*

Will had reddened instantly closing his eyes against the assaults to his senses, but Hannibal had gently soothed the furrowed brow with a kiss and a press of his thumb. As the blushing skin had become smooth beneath his touch he had thought of Michelangelo polishing his marble, infusing the cool stone with warmth as surely as he had poured the heat of his passion into his poetry. Michelangelo's poetry is often overlooked, overshadowed by the brilliance of his other talents, but for a young man alone in Florence and learning the language, his poems had been constant companions. Hannibal had envied the artist his torments for at least he could name the source of his loneliness.

Hannibal had felt the tug of contentment pulling at his lips. He was alone no more.

Despite the frown he knew would invariably taint the angelic lips Hannibal had taken a silky curl to twine between his fingers as he had leaned into Will's ear.

With your fair eyes a charming light I see, for which my own blind eyes would peer in vain…my words begin to breathe upon your breath…

Hannibal allows the memory to recede into a blaze of sunlight, the bed in Baltimore and its occupants fade into the glare of the phone at his feet. With the fading comes the twinge of pain that invariably strikes at his heart every time he treads upon the plush blue carpet of his bedroom to find Will in his memory palace.

When Hannibal casts his eyes upon Will's naked form he experiences something he thinks must resemble a religious experience. As Dante had viewed himself Love's captive and his beloved Beatrice the embodiment of perfection, Hannibal holds Will as the ideal of beauty and virtue in his universe and worthy of his singular veneration. A most cherished imago Hannibal would make flesh and blood. Like Beatrice had undone Dante, so Will leaves Hannibal utterly powerless when faced with such divine splendor, especially when laid out upon his bed as though Hannibal's own dreams had deposited him there.

Dante's passion is timeless and the sort of devotional love he experienced was not unique to him. Michelangelo had been struck by a similar thunderbolt with the grace and form of a young man and had identified with Dante's poetry as his relationship with the younger man had unfolded. Dante's imagery found its way into the poetry and charcoal drawings Michelangelo presented as gifts to his beloved Tommaso de' Cavalieri.

Hannibal has likewise expressed his feelings through his art and knows something of the torment in wanting to possess the thing you love with such totality that to merely look upon it without consuming it is torturous.

The associations Hannibal introduced with Dante's sonnet then had been abetted by the constant conditioning. He has been reinforcing those associations, figuratively presenting his heart in Lucia's tableau and alluding to his heart again in Will's tableau at Boboli. Will had partaken of his heart at dinner in Impruneta though Hannibal doubts his intentions have registered in the bone arena of his skull so thickly has denial been built into it.

The same conditioning that had guided Will along the path Hannibal had desired to take him now serves as a deterrent of the worst kind and Hannibal has only himself to blame. The blade has cut too deeply, and as Hannibal had expected, Will is loath to allow Hannibal to touch him. Hannibal had respectfully retreated when the finely arched brows had furrowed at his outstretched hand bearing a fresh towel. The offending towel he had pressed to his cheek for perhaps a minute now rests on the fender of the Ducati.

Of all the senses, including sight, tactile stimulation is by far the most effective means of provoking associations in Will. Will is as aware of this as he is aware of the conditioning, ergo the avoidance. Hannibal can't decide if he is witnessing denial or plain stubbornness. Will's capacity for either is immeasurable.

This is one instance when Hannibal would have been quite pleased to have been wrong. In this, Will is predictable, his sensitivity to his own weakness as glaring as the blade Hannibal had wielded. Even now, as Hannibal ties off the fresh bandage around his thigh in the garish light from his phone, Will remains apart from him, arms folded across his chest and legs crossed. He is a powder keg of emotions, sealed up and locked down as he observes Hannibal in silence.

He is retreating to the places in his mind that Hannibal cannot follow and counting the minutes until headlights flash at the crossroad signaling Daniel's arrival. Will's retreat cuts deeply into the melody of loneliness, the notes already jagged and sharp. To know that Will does not trust himself to be here with Hannibal alone in the great dark woods, to prefer to twist in his inferno rather than offer his company to Hannibal is maddening. Will is again reaching his hands through Hannibal's ribcage to plunge fingers into his beating heart and yank yet another piece from him.

Hannibal concedes there have been distractions for Will to wade through and they are about to remove one of those, a most pleasant task Hannibal is looking forward to. Before the Medici take their revenge upon Pazzi, Hannibal would prefer that Will's heart be attuned to the symphony they write. Will has been exposed to quite a lot of stimulation, not the least of which his own unique perspective, the crowning layer of all the other perspectives he assimilates as images and associations grow and connect like vines, like branches in his brain. Will cannot switch off his empathy.

I compulsively assume alternate perspectives.

Your empathy, yes. You still try and anticipate my mind. You are curious if you are correct. More curious about me than indulging your impulses.

Perhaps…

Marvel that Will is, his present retreat is unappreciated and…Hannibal sniffs, decidedly rude. He has indulged the cub long enough; fledglings must know their place, even this one. *Especially this one.* Sometimes, Will's energies must first be trained upon the physical, to clear his mind and cleanse his palate.

Hannibal thinks of their wrestling matches, similar application but far too benign to accommodate current circumstances.

"How quickly Patroclus discards his armor and ducks inside his tent. Is the regret you're experiencing all you hoped it would be?"

Hannibal pushes off from the ground, wipes his hands across the smooth black fabric that clings to muscle as he moves. Lips spread into a tight smile, satisfied the thick layer of bandages he has applied will last until they have secured their prey at Palazzo Vecchio. He lifts his eyes to find Will's face in profile, leaning into the shadows avoiding light and, Hannibal thinks, truth.

"A life without regret would be no life at all." Will sighs, words spoken crisply but so hollow they seem to float away into the dark fields on either side.

"You don't regret the killing, Will; you regret living, perhaps?"

"You weren't sure I would put on my armor."

"I'm not entirely sure you've taken it off. Or put on mine again. Which is it?"

"A terrible thing…not to be sure, I'm sure."

Will continues to gaze off into the darkened field to his right and Hannibal can see Cordell's cut has become a thick red line that moves as Will's jaw moves. Hannibal thinks the entire side of Will's face must be throbbing by now.

"You are…*infuriating…*impervious to certainty. I need to know you're not going to try and kill us both…"

"I already told you…"

"You told me you didn't want to be consumed in your inferno's fire. You may no longer wish to feed the fire, or perish by it, but your exit strategy remains…elusive."

“I’m just following my urges, cultivating them as the inspirations they are.”

Will employs the same hushed tone Hannibal had used when speaking these very words to him in Hobbs’ kitchen. The roses in the garden Hannibal would share with him have lots of thorns. Most of the roses were planted by Hannibal himself. He looks sideways at Hannibal unable to resist checking his response to the terse remark. Hannibal acknowledges the mimicry with a tic of his upper lip.

“We’re just alike, Will. Each with the capacity to deceive the other.” The tic peels back revealing a flash of incisors.

“We’ve moved beyond that, I think.”

“Have we?”

Hannibal adjusts the phone on the ground with his foot until the light shines directly on Will, who predictably…frowns.

“If not regret, then fear. Always your primary motivation.”

“My entire life can be measured in flashes of fear strung together like beads on a rosary. I’ve run out of string…and prayers.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Which god do you pray to?” Hannibal chides him.

“None…apparently.” Again, the words float away.

The rush of adrenaline has become a trickle and the familiar fear he always experiences when he is with Hannibal resurfaces. He wants. He needs. And the fear that he will lose himself with Hannibal tears at him, wrings him from the inside out. He tires of the struggle. He no longer seeks justice. He doesn’t even want revenge. He can blame Hannibal for awakening the monster within, but he cannot blame Hannibal for the terrible pleasures that have followed. He cannot fault Hannibal for following his own nature. Hannibal is at least true to himself; something that Will is not.

Will reminds himself Daniel is on the way. They have to meet up with Pazzi at Palazzo Vecchio. Jack will come out from his desk eventually if he hasn’t already. Hannibal is as aware of the limited time they have as he. What Hannibal wants from him are some assurances of good behavior. Pazzi next; if they survive that, Will can entertain an honest conversation. They have their agreement after all and Hannibal has some explaining to do.

Will inclines his head, licks his lips thoughtfully pressing them together, as though trying to make the words fit before he speaks. He lifts his eyes to Hannibal, peers out from the wind swept locks hanging thick and loose over his forehead.

“I’m not judging you. I’m not qualified to judge anyone.”

“Excepting yourself of course.” Hannibal scoffs gently taking a step toward Will and another. “What were you thinking back there, at the slaughter house? Did you imagine sacrificing yourself and taking me with you?”

Will continues to gaze at him, unmoved though he lifts his head finally, chin up at Hannibal.

“You’re angry.” Hannibal says.

“A little.” Will agrees.

“You think you are angry at me, for calling your bluff…at the slaughter house.”

Will thinks Hannibal is referring to more than the slaughter house, but he lets it go.

“Everyone has the right to risk his own life to preserve his life.” Will says, fingers tracing over the chrome of the Ducati. “Or the life of another.” He finishes, thinking of Daniel.

“No one accuses the man who jumps out a window to escape a fire of suicide?”

“Not to his face.” Will frowns.

Hannibal bites at the inside of his cheek. Will’s dry wit never disappoints. The flames of Will’s inferno burn unbearably close and Hannibal thinks Will recognized Mason’s trap for the proving ground it was. Hannibal needs to know if he seeks another window of escape. More avoidance to delay the inevitable of revealing himself.

“And if he takes another with him out the window…what is he guilty of?” Hannibal is close enough to touch the fender.

“Daring to hope for a greater good?” Will sighs, more a resigned huff and shakes his head. “We know each other too well. Pazzi is…meat. I can’t save you. I can’t even save myself.”

“No, you left that to me.”

“Did I?”

Will thinks of the farce played out at the slaughter house and wonders if Hannibal had entertained the idea of leaving him to the Fates and Mason. Even Steven.

“Rodrigo took a bullet to save Don Carlo. He did not save him so he could die.”

“But, that’s what happened.” Will insists knowing full well that is not Hannibal’s point. He feels like being contrary, the pricking will pass the time.

“He didn’t jump out a window with him.” Hannibal counters with a lift of his brow. “I did save you. How does that make you feel?”

Will leans back against the seat mind churning as he reaches for words to describe to Hannibal how these exchanges make him feel. How he feels about being saved will have to wait for that honest conversation when they will confess their sins of omission to one another.

“There’s this…pregnant pause between us, always there. A concentration of all of our doubts and deception – a bullet bursting on contact when the other speaks.”

Will turns his hand palm up and fingers open evoking an explosion, “Do you feel it?”

Hannibal nods, “Each of us accustomed to deceit from the other. The bullet as you call it implodes in the vacuum of trust and you see it like a displacement of molecules. Fascinating.”

And avoidant…

Hannibal takes a couple more steps until he stands beside Will, his intention only to ease into the intimacy he knows Will fears. With one hand he caresses the leather seat, with the other he cups Will's jaw, tilts the stubbly chin up higher. Will turns his head, shifts, and in the stream of light from the phone, Hannibal catches the flash of blue as Will jerks away from him, twists and slides from his grasp and Hannibal quickly follows on his heels.

The ground is unsteady beneath his feet as Will rounds the back of the bike, his intention only to put some space between them, to breathe the soupy summer night air rather than the musk and sweat that tease his senses and send his nerves on edge so they grate like sandpaper inside his flesh. The touch of Hannibal's fingers on his face had summoned too much. He does not need to look to know that Hannibal's hands reach for him.

"This game grows tiresome, Will. Too much has passed between us for this…pantomime."

"*Better to shun the bait than struggle in the snare*." Will ducks, but not quickly enough.

Hannibal grabs Will by the throat, ignores the hands that come up to sink fingers painfully into the shoulder he just dressed as he slams Will against the trunk of the tree that braces the bike.

"Time to put away childish things…" Hannibal looks carefully into the sea of blue.

The sea churns. Will turns his head into a wall of water that threatens to drown him where he stands, every nerve jangling as adrenaline spikes, air constricts in his lungs.

"Will…"

He holds Will in place, though Will struggles against the hand that closes around his throat he manages to look down. Hannibal follows his gaze and raises a brow thoughtfully at Will's well placed knee between his legs; Will's left leg straddles his right. Will drops his arms, stops struggling. Hannibal's arms are longer and with Will's back firmly planted against the tree trunk; his fingers barely graze Hannibal's broad shoulders in this position.

Will utters a slew of curses under his breath. A provocative prelude, intended to incite. Hannibal answers, pressing thumb against larynx until the vulgarity ceases and brows knead together, pale blue eyes turn upward, waiting. The body remembers its conditioning even if the brain does not… for the moment.

He feels the twitching of Will's throat beneath his fingers as he swallows, a sensual movement that ignites the embers that sweep now through his entire being. He feels blood coursing through Will's jugular, the throb of it rich and alive as he huffs frustrated into Hannibal's face. Will swallows again, less easily this time and Hannibal loosens his grip a fraction realizing Will is becoming dizzy from the pressure and lack of oxygen.

The familiar pucker appears to mar the smooth flesh between his brows, scrunched tightly in the moonlight. Memory flickers in the blue eyes that roll to the left, but the defiance remains in the tilt of his chin, the persistent angling of his head.

"You think… you changed anything…because…you came, got yourself shot?"

Cartilage rolls and clicks beneath Hannibal's fingers as Will forces the words out. His sweat fairly burns into Hannibal's nose, thick and sweet.

“I came for *you*, Will. I took that bullet for you. Yes, I think you could acknowledge that.”

Will’s lips curl in a snarl, “You do…*nothing* unless it…benefits you. I am…grateful but don’t think…I don’t know…sins of omission…when I see them.”

Will spits words strangled in venom, lips trembling but inches from Hannibal’s own. These words are not hollow, but spoken from the depths of the wound Hannibal knows stretches across pale flesh just beneath the thin cotton shirt he wears. The venom stings, and the sting thrums in his chest to run along his arms straight to the hands that hold this precious infuriating creature in his grasp, stubborn to the last and taunting him still. The only being to ever affront Hannibal as he has…and live.

Hannibal’s eyes narrow slightly and as a cloud passes overhead in the night sky, his face assumes the aspect of cut marble, colorless and no longer warm. A shudder courses through Will, an icy tentacle tightening in his gut, a thread of flame across his stomach. For an instant, for the time it takes to blow out a match, terror grips Will. The man that holds him fast against this tree could rip his head off or tear his heart from his chest with his bare hands for what Will has done to him, continues to do to him. And there is but one thing that stays Hannibal’s hands and keeps them from crushing his trachea and snapping every vertebra in his neck. From reaching into Will’s chest to take what is his.

Although Hannibal has forgiven Will for his transgression of betrayal, the terror causing his Adam’s apple to bob in his dry throat is because Will knows he twists Hannibal inside out. He is the one and only thing Hannibal wants. Hannibal has been changed by their association in ways even Hannibal does not know, or Will for that matter. Both of them changed forever after Baltimore. And though this monster before him is capable of unimaginable cruelty and violence, Will knows Hannibal loves him…and hates him at the same time, for the same thing.

We’re just alike. Alone without each other.

And he is never quite certain how Hannibal will perceive his emotional dilemma at any given moment, particularly when Will has provoked him as he has now. He is certain that keeping Hannibal intrigued is likely key to his continued survival. What happens when he injures the punishing pride and tempts the terrible temper one time too many? Will walks a tightrope from which he has already fallen once. The grip tightens slightly, Hannibal’s thumb presses like a stone and Will closes his eyes, concentrates on breathing.

“We suffer…the sins of omission…Will…”

Hannibal’s head inclines as though an invisible cord pulls him there, to inhale the scent of Will, his mouth so close to Will’s lips he can almost taste them. Will turns his head further into the bark that scrapes his head, away from him. Hannibal wonders if he turns to deny Hannibal, or himself.

“…because to speak truth to one another is unrecognizable or…unwelcome.” He practically presses the words into the hollow of Will’s aching cheek.

Hannibal’s eyes linger on the sweat trickling over Will’s exposed throat then collarbone to disappear inside the shreds of damp shirt, he imagines Will’s heart thumping inside, each beat an echo of his own. Though Will has killed, made his tableau, played his hand with Jack, he is still prey to his own fear. As Hannibal gazes at him he wonders if this Will is also a fabrication, too used to wearing the familiar suit he has donned for Hannibal many times. Donning it again so he can exploit the awful weakness he discovered upon waking to that scar.

“Does that… *we*… include… you?” Vibrations hum against Hannibal’s fingers that hold trachea and Adam’s apple captive as Will clears his throat.

“I’m not the one who is both deaf and blind to what is happening.”

“What…is happening, Hannibal? You …choose to…ignore your…weakness.”

Hannibal’s face does not move, nor do his eyes leave Will’s.

“To what weakness would you be referring? Seems I have the upper hand at the moment.”

The words are barely out of his mouth when Will’s knee abruptly makes contact, and lightning crackles behind Hannibal’s eyes as the pain registers between his legs. Hannibal stumbles backward, shocked at the maneuver as much as the baleful whine that escapes his throat. Will is already away from the trunk of the tree, arms extended and Hannibal is sent reeling backward still bent over, fighting for control of his body as Will’s knee again comes up, this time to his face, bone crunching into his mouth. Lips catch on teeth and Hannibal’s mouth fills with the metallic taste of his own blood.

Hannibal thinks it not coincidental that Will struck at the two sources of intimacy and pleasure he both craves and denies. The thought invigorates and Hannibal lunges from the ground, head lowered to propel Will once again backward against the tree trunk, slamming him hard enough to knock the wind out of him. Hopefully, hard enough to get Will’s attention. Hannibal knows why he avoids intimacy and it is precisely the reason Hannibal has forced it; resumed the circle of violence and intimacy neither can deny.

The bark tears through the thin cotton at his back and Will’s head explodes with pain as it cracks against the tree. He crumples forward, Hannibal’s head still plowed into his ribs. He brings his hands up to shove Hannibal off if only to breathe. The impulse to pummel Hannibal until his arms give out alternates with the equally strong impulse to grab fistfuls of the dark locks that hang in his face, imagine them blonde again and paint Hannibal’s throat with his tongue. Will would laugh at the insanity of it if he could breathe.

Hannibal pulls back, allows Will to catch his breath watching him heave against the tree. He cups his jaw again, tilts Will’s chin up to stare into a very angry sea of blue. One hand braces Will’s throat and with the other poised over Will’s cheek, he moves his thumb over the soft stubble and thinks how he has missed this…

“Don’t.”

Will turns his head though it pains him to move it even a little and Hannibal’s thumb freezes where it rests aside his mouth.

“Will…” Hannibal leaves his thought unfinished.

Patience, Hannibal thinks. This is an especially abrupt transition and, Hannibal is certain, intensely cathartic; a healthy dose of palate cleansing that is long overdue, for both of them.

Will’s anger is his way of coping with the battle that rages inside, only now is he comfortable allowing Hannibal to see. And while this is progress of a sort, Will wants to provoke him, wants Hannibal to wring the fight out of him so he relents, only to resent Hannibal for it later. Will needs to cling to his hate. Hate is part of his armor and he has not learned how to put on his armor without it. Hannibal's conditioning runs deep and Will's awareness of it alters nothing. The conditioning is as much a part of him as the predator.

Will's anger will purge him of all the emotional detritus he throws at his fear, and Hannibal. A necessary part of the process of constructive destruction. Fear gives rise to anger in Will. Once the anger has been expended, the true nature of Will's forgiveness can take shape.

Hannibal almost laughs aloud. He is as susceptible to Will's influence as the other way around. He stands with hands at Will's throat, his anger, like the wound throbbing in his chest, clamors for release but Hannibal knows Will could quiet the angry throb with a glance, a brush of soft lips to his fingers, a press of soft curls to Hannibal's forehead. For the granting of any of those, Hannibal's fingers do not move.

"I'm not the product of…a set of influences, not even yours." Will stubbornly speaks into the bark of the tree.

"No, you're not."

Hannibal reaches to cradle Will's head, massage the tousled curls at the nape of his neck, "Not entirely. You can no longer hide what you have become. Not from me."

"No, I…can't." Will whimpers, head falling forward as Hannibal's fingers wriggle more deeply through his hair.

Hannibal notes Will's chest rises and falls in sync with his own, for every breath he takes, Will exhales at the same time. As if noticing the same thing, Will's eyes drop, his breathing slows as Hannibal's does.

"What pains you pains me." Hannibal says, staring down his nose at Will.

Hannibal thinks that true enough as he slides his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, assessing the damaged flesh there. The pain feels wonderful and Hannibal welcomes it, welcomes the gift from Will that it is. Welcomes the awareness it engenders in him. And, is gratified by the anger that prompted it. Patroclus' anger is part of his suit and it must be stripped from him before Achilles entrusts him with armor and spear again.

Still cradling the curls he has missed so much, Hannibal presses his thumb to Will's bruised lips, savors the softness there, still and warm, silk upon his skin.

Will shudders, the touching still too much to process, but Hannibal holds him fast, and Will looks up again, sees a flicker of the rueful smile he remembers in Hannibal's face. Will reads the appeal in that sad smile and the dark eyes that do not move from his face. Hannibal does not want to hurt him, but Will needs to test the limits of Hannibal's forgiveness to see how far his forgiveness goes before he offers it. He pushes down the fear, scar twitching terribly, his fingers curl into fists he holds at his sides. He is caught in a swarm of conversations and images, his skull pounds with the constant drum of distraction.

They don't have time for this…

"We had an agreement…to wait until we had removed the Greeks and Trojans…for that honest conversation…" Will's lips wriggle beneath the fingers.

The dark eyes harden to bullets and Will feels distrust exploding between them.

“I would have it now, I think.”

“This…isn’t conversation. You’re usually more literal.”

“Usually. This was a euphemism. I thought you knew…”

Just as Hannibal wonders how much longer Will’s passivity will last, Will’s arms come straight up from below, the angle perfect, and Hannibal’s elbows crack, then fold, a foot to his chest and Will is away from the tree, again. Hannibal lunges. Will pivots, almost falls but catches himself. Hannibal is almost upon him when Will stops, stands aside, causing Hannibal to turn in order to catch him. Or try to.

But the turn slows Hannibal down. A grunt of pain erupts from Hannibal as he twists to grab…at air. Will uses the opportunity to take a swing at ribs he knows are already tender. His fist hits its mark, knuckles crunch against bone, once, twice…an upper cut to Hannibal’s chin and…

A blow to his solar plexus sends Will to his knees groaning and gasping for air. Another, to his jaw sends his teeth sideways into his tongue and Will tastes blood as he drops on all fours. Hannibal stands over him, flexing the fingers of his left hand. Will knows his shoulder must be throbbing like hell, but Hannibal had known Will was expecting punches to come from the undamaged right arm.

Before Will can scramble off the ground Hannibal has him by the collar. He drags Will along the ground, gasping and kicking at the dirt. The left shoulder is aflame with searing pain, but he continues his paces, Will cussing and grabbing at his legs the entire time.

Will’s arms flail but he manages to find traction in the folds of slippery fabric and pull himself up, using Hannibal’s pants then shirt to steady him as he stumbles beside him…back to the tree.

Using Will’s collar to first pull him up Hannibal hurls Will face first into the trunk of the tree and Will turns his head at the last second to avoid smashing his nose. Rough bark grazes his ear as he twists around to Hannibal. He is instantly wedged between tree trunk and bared chest, hand to his throat. His shoulder is wrenched flush against the tree and he yelps as his head slams again into the tree sending splinters of light before his eyes.

Hannibal’s face is contorted with pain, but his grip does not lessen as he takes gulps of air, swallows and presses his forehead to Will’s. Will squirms but is held tight against the tree.

“Back where…we…started.” Hannibal pants, “Care to go again?”

Will shakes his head, breathing ragged as he pushes his head forward, tilts up to look into Hannibal’s face.

Hannibal’s nose grazes down the gentle slope of Will’s to pause at the tip as fingers sink into whiskers along the exquisitely bared throat. He presses and pushes into the soft cartilage there, senses ablaze with the actual flesh he has so long had to recreate from memory. All Hannibal wants is to drown his senses in Will, to drink him up in great gulps until he has slaked his thirst for him, fed his need to feel him solid, warm, and alive beneath him.

The creature stirs beneath Will’s skin. It stirs between his legs, coils in his bowels, as the tugging across his stomach grows tighter. Will feels flushed beneath his collar, and as he breathes he feels he might burst at the seams.

“To the truth and all its consequences, you said.”

“I take it
back.”

“Too late. You’re testing me. Why? You think I won’t kill you?”

“That old chestnut?”

The snarl freezes on his lips as the vice tightens around his throat. Dizzying pressure fills his head and his eyes roll up into blackness. He relaxes immediately.

Oops…

When some semblance of consciousness returns he feels Hannibal breathing, more like snorting, into his face. Will flicks his tongue over dry lips, winces with the memories the moist breath summons. His anger expended and his nerves plucked raw, he has nothing left to offer Hannibal but their honest conversation. This is not how he imagined that taking place but since when have things gone as planned with Hannibal.

Besides, God has conveniently slammed Adam against a tree in their would-be garden. He wonders if God anticipates Adam literally peeling off his clothes. Perhaps that is a euphemism, too. Will inhales deeply, straining to turn his head so as not to smear the blood dripping from the Almighty’s nose.

“Will…Do you believe I won’t kill you?”

“You keep trying...” He manages, his voice surprisingly cool.

“Your life…is mine to take, Will.”

The blue eyes cloud and Will’s fingers dig between his, trying to pry them from his throat. Hannibal has to press his body against Will’s to ensure his legs, or knees, do not surprise him again. Will’s breath in his face is maddeningly hot as he opens his mouth and the tender throbbing Hannibal feels between his legs has nothing at all to do with their recent foray into physics.

Will wrests his head to speak, away from the warm breath that tantalizes, and expels the venom into the night. “And you…would take nothing from me I was not prepared to give.”

He digs his fingernails into flesh, but Hannibal does not even flinch.

“You are not a moth drawn to a flame. You understand the nature of the flame.”

Will gives up trying to pull Hannibal’s fingers off. He licks the blood from his mouth, sucks the lower lip between his teeth to let the blood settle on his tongue, the taste grounding him while his lower half thrums insanely to Hannibal’s persistent poking. Hannibal continues to straddle him, but eases off a bit, a wary eye to the appendages below. Will slumps against the tree trunk only to be yanked upright once again. He thinks of being similarly pinned against Hannibal’s kitchen door, his fingers fumbling to loosen a very stubborn tie…

“I am…engulfed in flame.” Will says, Adam’s apple rolling beneath the insistent thumb.

Hannibal dares press his nose into the damp disheveled curls hanging in ringlets from the bowed head that instantly shudders. Will wriggles beneath him, the movement not at all unpleasant and Hannibal is certain he grinds his hips against him on purpose. So infuriating…

“My dear stubborn Will. I’m right beside you. *We* are engulfed in flame.”

“I seem to be the one burning up.” Will coughs but the stone upon his throat does not budge.

Hannibal thrusts his hips, fabric deliciously taut against his cock as he rubs against Will, pressing and grinding until Will moans the sound a delightful vibration beneath his hand. Pale blue eyes flare from beneath the damp curls as Will’s face reddens and his throat pulses quite hot.

Will clenches his fists, eyes blinking furiously at the creature lurking behind Hannibal. It rears up from its preening to level smoldering black eyes at him. Will quickly decides his hallucinations are not the *salient* issue he wants to discuss at the moment. Salience screams loudly from between his legs as his head pounds from the lack of oxygen, the hand clenched at his throat exerting perfectly calibrated pressure.

Will floats between consciousness and unconsciousness and Hannibal watches the blue eyes dart from the trees and back to him as the jaw grinds back and forth. Hannibal doubts Will is ever alone. His imagination has been his constant companion since childhood. But his imagination is no longer the safe haven it once was. He sees only nightmares and Hannibal would have them become dreams once again.

There is only one place where Will has slept in the arms of Morpheus without awaking in a cold sweat. But getting him there is proving most difficult. He loosens his hold on Will’s throat and eases off the tensed body beneath him. Will’s arms immediately come up again thrashing like a drowning man and Hannibal pins the writhing body against the tree trunk again, fingers again at his throat while easing one waving arm back down. Will clenches his other fist in the air, lets it hover by Hannibal’s head then lowers it with reluctance to hang at his side.

Satisfied the cub is sufficiently subdued for the moment, Hannibal resumes his cautious stance, fingers and thumb encircled about the tremulous throat. The lips part and Will’s tongue darts out to circle the sensuous mouth like clockwork, oral fixation adequately stimulated.

“You’re following your impulses. That’s good. Still angry?”

“I’ll let you know. Keep talking…”

Hannibal clears his throat, ignores the peevish provocation. “You don’t have a monopoly on anger, Will. Plenty to go around.”

“Those sins of omission have come full circle, haven’t they?” Will raises his brows, waits.

Hannibal considers the taunting glint in the pale blue eyes. “Reciprocity is at the heart of a healthy relationship. Our sins of omission allow us the convenience of not admitting truths we would rather not hear from the other. The symphony we write requires the melody be clear.”

“And the garden we would share constructed by Machiavelli. A labyrinth of deception I’m not sure I want to muddle through.”

"Negotiating boundaries, aren't we?"

Hannibal loosens his grip considerably, allowing Will the freedom to move his neck. And to swallow unobstructed, always a riveting pleasure to watch.

"We agreed to no outright lies, then and now. I haven't lied to you Will…"

Will looks aside. Hannibal is correct. Technically.

I don't expect you to admit anything. You can't. But I prefer sins of omission to outright lies, Dr. Lecter. Don't lie to me.

Will you return the courtesy?

"I withheld certain confessions, but once you asked me…I was true to my word. When I asked if you would return the courtesy, you never answered."

Hannibal strokes his finger along the tattered collar, takes soft curls into his fingers

Will wriggles beneath the fingers. He unwittingly established the boundaries and set the precedent only to completely disregard them later. Every exchange between them had contained bullets waiting to explode.

"I wanted my reckoning."

"You wanted to want your reckoning. But for your empathy you might have had it."

"Didn't I? You lost everything. But for the lie…"

"But for the lie, you would already be with me. But for the lie, Will…I had to let you go. You told me you were euphoric when you killed Lounds. That…was an outright lie. Unless you were referring to the scenarios of your imagination."

Will rolls his eyes. The arrogance is insufferable. "Yes. I lied. We've already established that. But, my *wanting* a reckoning cost you everything."

"Not…everything. And it has cost you plenty as well."

Hannibal loosens his grip upon the shoulders he would bare in an instant and caress with his lips, tongue and teeth.

"You were empathizing with me the entire time. You offered up Jack and sent him to me. Your idea. You knew he would have FBI back up. Left us to fight it out, but something went wrong or you would have never come. Instead, you called to warn me. To protect Jack?"

"To save lives, Hannibal. Even yours. Too much sacrificed already. I let you inside my head and I could no longer tell the difference between us. I could anticipate nothing but…regret that night."

"You were not the only one anticipating regret that night."

The dark eyes gazing into his soften considerably. Will understands his power. He supposes he has always understood it. This is Will's power over Hannibal, it is the passion that stirred Achilles' wrath. Stirs it still.

Hannibal presses against Will, enjoys the flutter of lashes and the flush of heat the contact brings.

“I stand corrected. You are not deaf and blind to what is happening.” Hannibal glances down at the tents in both their trousers. “You are resistant. Reluctant. You made an offer and I accepted. I will have what is mine.”

“Or you’ll take it raw and bleeding in your hands?”

“If that’s what you want. But, it isn’t. I could have taken it before.”

“You had your chance, but you didn’t take it.”

“Neither did you.”

“No…I got your forgiveness instead.”

“I offered it. You were too bent on your reckoning to accept it.”

“The acceptance came…later.”

“And you came to Florence to offer your forgiveness?”

“I’ve been in therapy about that…” Will sniffs, looks aside. “Mason’s trap…part of your design?”

“Our design. Admit it, Will. You wanted me to save you. You want…to be courted, seduced. Your contribution to our design.”

The accusations send a fresh flush of heat throughout, he feels on fire and Hannibal is so near he must smell the scorch of that heat upon him. His season in hell continues. *Hallucinations are without number…*

“You let me walk right into it.”

“Did you think I would willingly walk into Mason’s trap without a plan? A part of you knew.”

“How many more sins of omission am I to suffer?” Will snaps, frustration and friction causing a furious heat to rise…everywhere.

“At least as many as you have committed. Fate and circumstance left me no choice.”

“You interfered with Fate, again.”

“As you hoped. You have a tendency to let Fate decide a great many things. Fate knocked on your door. You opened the door.”

“You manipulated. The psychic driving. Took advantage of my illness…”

“Nothing happened that you did not allow happening. The choices were always yours, Will.”

“How can you justify using deception to create truth?”

“I don’t have to justify it…or apologize for it. It stands before me.”

A second of vertigo sends Will into fog that sweeps past his eyes. The wisps of condensation clear and Will sees familiar bookcases. He leans over the polished railing in Hannibal's office, sees himself and Hannibal below.

You're fostering co-dependency.

Is that what I'm doing?

Will listens again to their conversation as they had sat facing one another in comfortable cracked leather and pays attention to the inflection in tone, the emphasis on the personal pronouns. He shifts restlessly between bark and the well-muscled body holding him. The fingers at his throat caress his jugular, Hannibal's way of reminding Will he noticed the shift in weight, and perhaps tenor of their present discourse.

"You needed to play out your fantasy of redemption. Daniel fed you drugs and sent you to the playground in your mind. I provided the same."

"Did it wound to know I would consider death with you rather than life?" Will fairly snarls into the cheek that grinds against his.

"You had to entertain the concept of death. But, you don't fear death. You fear life…with me."

Will closes his eyes. Always a step ahead of him, Hannibal had suggested using their ideals of each other knowing where it would lead. Once Will had drawn out all the pieces, Hannibal had been able to move them. Battle tested friendship. Tableaux to establish intentions and communicate beneath the enemy's nose.

Hannibal is never happier than to be standing on the precipice orchestrating chaos.

And here we are, spinning stars at the event horizon of chaos.

It is from chaos that spinning stars are born.

No harpsichord here.

No. Perhaps next time.

No…salon.

We'll make another…

From the ashes of the slaughter house, Hannibal has constructed a salon for them. Its floors are not polished marble but moss and dirt and its walls are not covered in antique frames and decorous tapestries but twisted trees and withering sunflowers. There is no harpsichord but a makeshift sanctuary of breath and bone, not ivory.

"Our imagoes. Achilles and Patroclus." Will says softly.

Hannibal rolls his forehead against the curls, nose grazing nostrils to steal a breath from the being he has allowed to rend his heart, nearly ripping it from him and whose blood continues to pulse beneath his fingertips.

“Yes.” The answer falls just as softly, “And Mephistopheles and Faust; as they should have been. Felt good to punch the Devil, didn’t it?”

Will looks up into the eyes that hover over his nose. “The devil punched back.”

“He always does. The anger you directed at me is for yourself.”

“No…I think I am still singularly angry at you.”

Hannibal shakes his head, inhaling the intoxicating scent of their blood and sweat. “Anger directed at me for exposing the truth of who you are. Not comfortable in your skin yet. What are you feeling right now, Will?”

“Sore.”

“What did Adam feel in the garden when he realized he was naked?”

Hannibal adopts the tone of teacher, a tone that Will finds alternately endearing and annoying. He closes his eyes as Hannibal drags his lips over cheeks and feels another flush of warmth steal down his neck. He feels as naked as Adam, a blushing rose in Hannibal’s garden of earthly delights, a lamb to the slaughter. He gathers his thoughts despite the nuzzling, determined to wring from Hannibal every ounce of restraint.

“He was ashamed at his nakedness. Not just the nudity itself; but the awareness, the shift in understanding because he had partaken of the tree. He didn’t want God to know he had sinned.”

“He didn’t want God to know he had enjoyed it.”

An involuntary chuckle from Will and Hannibal revels in the throaty cracked richness of the sound. Still, Will does not relent, does not move his head an inch toward Hannibal, defiantly stiff necked he leans away, forcing Hannibal to constantly correct for the persistent loll of his head. Hannibal thinks he delights in his coyness too much.

Hannibal rolls his hips against Will, presses close zipper to zipper knowing the rub of fabric, the pressing of their flesh feels every bit as delightful to Will as it does to him. Will is as hard and erect as he, the difference being Will is ashamed, uneasy with the transition and doing his damnedest to ignore or otherwise avoid it in typical Will fashion.

“Beneath the flame of anger you also feel the burn of shame.”

The laugh Will coughs out between his fingers is harsh. “Shame…”

“Yes, shame.”

Hannibal’s free hand moves along his body, slides underneath the shredded shirt until his fingers find the scar.

“Don’t…” Will warns though there is nothing he can do to stop Hannibal from touching him there, or any place else.

Will sucks in his breath, flesh and muscle convulsing at the touch, associations twining around his skull so quickly he cannot control them. Hannibal is thrusting intimacy at him, knowing he sends a barrage of emotions with the intrusion. Just like Hannibal to slam him with a transition as he had slammed him into the tree. A most abrupt transition.

Frustrated, Will looks up to see red rimmed eyes glowing like amber in the darkness, the creature's great wings hang like an umbrella over them. Claws, sharp and cold rake his skin. Will shakes his head, closes his eyes. The talons retract and the scraping softens, fingers glide along the raised flesh inviting images, sensations he has experienced before. Surf and ocean mist. Satin and sandalwood. Lips upon his stomach. Beardless smooth lips smeared with glittering grains of sand give way to the bristling of whiskered lips wet and warm upon his flesh, mournful…penitent. Hannibal's bed in Impruneta…the bathtub…the wet dew kissed ground at Boboli…

You did not intend to share your wound with me like this…

The lips become the fingers caressing him now and his senses reel. The caressing continues patient and soothing and his body uncoils, the vicious slithering inside quiets as his body melts into the touch, pliant…as clay. He grasps the fingers that move over his skin like gauze, like breath. He presses Hannibal's hand into his flesh, granting permission as he had with Daniel, not trusting himself to look at Hannibal. Not just yet. He concentrates on the moment unable to distinguish between hallucination and reality if either really matters anymore.

Hannibal welcomes the tentative overture, even if the wayward cub continues to hurl barbs. What rose does not have thorns? Encouraged, Hannibal continues to caress the ruined flesh with the one hand and with the other cradles the curls at the nape head already bowed, bent in acquiescence.

"You put on a suit of me, for me, before. Wore it for a very long time. So used to wearing your suit of me to catch me…"

"I did…catch you." Will almost smiles.

Hannibal's tongue slips between his teeth to keep his lips still. The remark is typically tart, delivered with transparent affection. Hannibal is further ingratiated as Will lifts his other hand to alight hesitantly on Hannibal's forearm. Fingertips float along his skin as Will eases into the transition, striking all the right notes, becoming reacquainted with the proper arrangement, seeking cues as always.

"Ever the clever boy. And it would appear I…have caught you in my snare."

Will huffs in response, turning his uninjured cheek toward Hannibal though Will does not favor him with even a glance. He knows Hannibal longs to bask in that tender gaze and withholds, offering glimpses of their bed in Baltimore, teasing Hannibal with flesh and memory. The slender fingers draw tremulous circles over Hannibal's, drawing notes from his skin and he feels like a human Theremin from which Will plucks a familiar melody. The chords vibrate sensuously, a pulsating rhythm, a pleasant throbbing that swells from below. He presses his face to Will's cheek as the melody intensifies.

"You are so used to the suit it feels unnatural to take it off, especially in front of me. You could pretend to pretend before, delude yourself."

"I'm not…deluded." Will rasps into the charged air so thick with Hannibal's scent his head spins.

Not undecided…indifferent….unstable…insane…

“Not anymore. But revealing who you are…to me…invites shame. Shame is the vulnerability you feel now that you are exposed.” Hannibal pauses, considers the quaking flesh beneath his fingertips, “I know the feeling.”

The admission is not so hard to part with as Hannibal had imagined. A fragile bud of truth he has cast into the garden. An invitation for Will to cast another.

“I suppose you do.” Will says, eyes down and wetting his lips in that maddening way he has, “You let me see you, expected empathy and acceptance in return.”

Will understands the source and scope of the terrible anger wrought by his betrayal. Understands the forgiveness Hannibal cradles in his hands. Understands the regret, understands the need to gather up the teacup once again no matter how shattered, how fractured it is. They are, each of them, so utterly alone without the other.

Hannibal breathes and his breath falls moist onto Will’s cheek, his nose, his lips and a fresh flush of desire sweeps anew. With every breath Will takes Hannibal’s chest lifts with his. With every breath, the red rimmed eyes of the creature burn ever closer.

“A sharing and a bearing of each other’s secrets.” Hannibal murmurs into his cheek, then hair, sending another ripple of electricity through him.

I let you know me, see me…

You wanted to be seen.

By you. Only you. Ever…you.

They are just alike. And, having found each other, having tasted true companionship, the loneliness cannot be assuaged by anything less than complete exclusivity. The situation in Baltimore had been unsustainable and it would appear the same applies to their separation. Will knows embarking on a life with Hannibal is the only way he will not splinter and sink into his abyss. Hannibal makes him feel…whole. As Hannibal likely intended. Will sighs. Is he overcoming Fate, or accepting it?

Does it matter?

“Hannibal…”

Will’s voice trails off as Hannibal begins to sprout glossy black feathers. The serpent’s tail coils around his legs, slithers up his calf, then knee, higher to grip his thigh like a tentacle, ice sinking into his flesh. The trees around them glow with flames the color of sunset. He wants to scream at the madness that tears at his mind. He wants to bury himself in the strong arms that encircle him, to take Hannibal’s tongue in his mouth and suck from him the comfort he knows is there, to slide his cock between thighs that will squeeze like a vice until he lies spent and sated beneath him.

He would already have his tongue down Hannibal’s throat and his hands unfastening trousers but for the fear that grips him should he release his demon, never to take it back within himself. He thinks of his infernal likeness bearing down on him in the slaughter house, imploding on contact in a shimmering of dust.

Will bites at his lip but he feels his eyes beginning to well up regardless. He looks at the grove surrounding them, at the trails of yellow and orange flame between the branches, at the burning eyes of the creature looming from Hannibal's eye sockets. His stomach clenches as a thread of flame moves over the scar, over the wound that will not heal.

Let it all the way out. Reveal yourself. It's the only way you can leave your inferno. Stripped of indifference.

The fragmented memory of a finger lifting a tear from his cheek to take into lips poised over his face drifts through his mind. He is lying on the ground at Boboli and the somber face that floats above his is Hannibal's. He struggles to hold on to that moment.

Trust is not a rose that blooms easily in our garden, is it?

The moment is shattered by the swipe of the creature's sharp beak along his jaw, the phantom touch of talons upon his shoulders. His back prickles and he scuffs his back against the bark, frantically trying to scrape the tines he feels erupting along his spine, across his shoulders. He ducks his head to hide the pained grimace he cannot help. He grips Hannibal by the elbows, shaking uncontrollably.

The mirror you made of me, for me, is not you. You deny us both.

I'm afraid…if I let it out I'll never get it back in.

Because you fear it. Fear like impulses can be controlled. When you deny your instincts, you deny yourself happiness. Deny the beast and he will grow hungry.

Will has been starving the beast, teasing it with fantasies and seeking to sate its hunger with a sensitive and willing surrogate in Daniel. The beast waits to devour him whole and Will would have it ravage him, over and over again.

"I hate this…" Will moans, a miserable pressure inside his chest he just wants…gone. "I hate…" Will pauses, unable to let the pointed pronoun slip from his lips. Because…it's not true.

Hannibal's shoulder is smarting terribly, the lidocaine an inadequate shock absorber given all the movement, but he manages to keep Will upright as he twists in the inferno only he can see. Compassion stirs as Will breaks apart in his arms, body racked with silent sobs, face contorted in an agonized grimace Hannibal knows well. He takes the tousled head of curls into his hands, cradles the bruised face he loves and looks carefully at the swollen trembling lips and tearful eyes. He waits. Will's hands slowly feel their way up his arm so the bloody fingers can rest on his shoulders, clawing at the fabric as Will folds into his chest. He looks up at Hannibal, eyes so intensely blue Hannibal is breathless as Will opens his mouth to bestow his forgiveness.

Will pulls the creature to him, buries his face in its downy breast. He feels…ravenous. He drags his lips from collarbone to throat, lingers at the jugular pleased at the slight quickening of pulses there.

Hannibal blinks in surprise. He calmly assesses Will for a moment as they embrace, a crush of curls at his chin and mouth poised over his throat. This is the cub Hannibal remembers, the cub for whom Hannibal would bare his throat and with whom he would share all that he is.

"Will." Hannibal swallows in anticipation as he tilts back his head.

He immediately feels teeth then tongue fall upon his skin, a sprinkling of dew and the scraping of thorns…

The odor of roasted flesh, human and pig, hangs in the smoke and Jack taps his fingers testily on the hood of his Mercedes. He waits for a courier en route to the slaughter house, the employee from the private service had refused to hand the envelope over at headquarters and so, she had been directed here. Zee sits in the passenger seat focused on his laptop, perusing lab reports and likely trading innuendo with Price.

His phone vibrates in his pocket and Jack scowls at the screen. Speak of the devil and he appears.

“Hello, Jimmy. What’s up? Did your contact come through?”

“I expect confirmation any minute.”

“Then why did you call? Wanted some company while you wait?” Jack says tiredly.

“Um…I wanted to provide some context to our previous discussion.”

Jack sighs into the phone. “What kind of context?”

“I’ve been resorting Hannibal’s drawings and…”

“Re…sorting. Why?”

“I was playing Will, sort of. Trying to see them how Hannibal sees them.”

“Okay. Impress me.” Jack rolls his eyes. He has nothing to do but wait for the courier.

“Classical mythology is everywhere. Hannibal’s familiarity with art and literature is really astounding.”

“So is Will’s I’m thinking.”

“I agree. If Hannibal drew these for himself, it wouldn’t matter if Will was familiar or not. But he left the drawings for Will to see. I’ll start with the Boucher.”

“Which one is that?”

“Ah…the one with the swan?”

“Go on.”

Jack stuffs his hands in his pockets as he glances around the parking lot teeming with yellow and black FBI jackets. He thinks the image of Will being fellated by a virile swan will never go away. He is sure of it.

“There’s no mistaking the inferences there. I mean Hannibal is obviously the swan, Zeus. Zeus is known for his flagrant indiscretions, but Leda, Will if you will, never accepts Zeus. Never forgives him for the rape.”

“Doesn’t look like rape. Looks like they moved past forgiveness in Hannibal’s version.”

“That’s not the focus of the Boucher. Hannibal is only copying Boucher’s style and imagery. I won’t go into the art historical explanations behind Boucher’s rendering…”

“Thank you.”

“But…it’s the subject matter that matters. Not the act depicted.”

“It’s not a fantasy, or an elaborate…memento?”

“Well, given the accuracy of Will’s anatomy, they could have engaged in…a similar act but the point is, Hannibal is Zeus. Zeus can change himself into anything. Here, he’s a swan. In the rest of the myths Hannibal chooses to draw, the eagle embodies Zeus, either as his messenger or an incarnation of Zeus.”

“And?”

“Hannibal sees himself as Zeus. That’s consistent with his pathology, I know. It is also a consistent representation of him that interacts with all the incarnations of Will.”

“Code. Because Hannibal does not draw himself.”

“Well, there’s the one of Achilles and Patroclus he put himself in.”

“We’ll tackle that another time. Which myths? Didn’t he draw Will as Saint Sebastian, too?”

“I can only handle one thread at a time, Jack. Saints are Catholic, not Classical. But, sometimes the classical is alluded to in the religious in Renaissance art…”

“I get the difference, Jimmy. But, there were a lot of Saint Sebastians.”

“I think Hannibal romanticized the subject matter like the artists he copies. Maybe he associates Will with sacrifice and martyrdom.”

“Or maybe he just likes painting Will in agony.”

“Jack, he likes painting Will because Will is…beautiful. The suffering expressed in the St. Sebastian paintings is…ecstasy disguised as piety.”

“Oh…well, go on. Obviously, I was remiss in taking art appreciation classes.”

“Besides all the Achilles and Patroclus stuff, Hannibal drew variations on Prometheus and Ganymede, the two most famous and passionate myths involving the eagle.”

“I know the Prometheus myth. Ganymede was another rape wasn’t it?”

“It’s called a rape but it was anything but. Zeus comes as a giant eagle to whisk away the gorgeous Ganymede to Olympus where he becomes Zeus’ personal cup bearer. They are usually depicted um, fondling each other in flight.”

“I see. What are you getting at?”

“They play head games, Will and Hannibal. Hannibal left eagle feathers in Boboli. He left goose feathers at the fountain. Goose feathers may allude to Leda and the Swan because Leda turns herself into a goose at one point in the myth. There's all those hearts embedded in the tableaux. And there's the Vita Nuova."

"What? I'm not following. You sound like Will. And I don't mean that as a good thing."

"We talked about it before. Misdirection maybe, but Will did mention it subconsciously or not. I see the theme of unrequited love in Hannibal's drawings Jack."

"The thought crossed my mind last time we talked. You have just corroborated my thinking."

"It's in everything, Jack. I am sorry to say I know a little about the feeling myself."

"Easy Jimmy. Explain." Jack warns before Price tells him way more than he wants to hear or know.

"The affection, the love if you want to call it that is intense. Will lit a fire he couldn't put out. I think Hannibal was smothering him and he tried to back out."

"That might explain the confrontation between them in the kitchen. I never saw it, never heard it. Will has never talked about it."

Jack grimaces into the phone. Will insists he doesn't remember the exchange between them, claiming trauma. Clayton had carefully talked around the topic when Jack had asked him about his progress with Will's therapy. Jack is certain Will's memory lapses are greatly exaggerated.

"Will did pose for some of these. Well, he posed for Hannibal in Baltimore and Hannibal recreated them here."

"How do you figure that?"

"There are figure studies of Will and there are completed drawings that copy the pose, transfer it."

"Jimmy, I think you've been spending too much time with the drawings. Looking for a job as the curator of the Hannibal Lecter Exhibit in my Evil Minds Research Museum?"

"You couldn't pay me enough, Jack. I'm telling you this because you intend to confront Will and Hannibal at some point, don't you?

"Of course. That's the idea anyway."

"Then you had better know what you are dealing with. Whatever is going on between them is going to play out with you. You are…a threesome, the original trio in all this."

"You have a point. I suppose you're right. Continue."

"Dante and Beatrice. The imagery of Love eating at your heart. The pain of loving and not having that love returned. The rape of Leda versus the rape of Ganymede. Hannibal is showing a negative so Will can see the positive. It's all about associations."

"And Prometheus? Will's interpretation fits in that instance. Eternal punishment for deceiving Zeus."

"Maybe he means that Will's punishment will be prolonged if he doesn't come back. That he will suffer as Hannibal suffers…without him.

“That’s a lot to digest, Jimmy. These are all solicitations from Hannibal to Will. No return messages.”

“That’s why it’s unrequited, Jack.”

“Right.” Jack says, scratching whiskers that qualify as a beard.

“Except…”

“Now what?”

“Well, a couple things. Will and Hannibal shared a heart for dinner. I don’t need to explain the implications of that.”

“No, you don’t. What else?”

“We still don’t know where Hannibal took Luciano apart. It wasn’t here.”

“The tableaux were deposited in different locations.”

“Could be the reason. We just don’t know. I know you don’t want to think Will did Luciano and there is no proof that he did.”

“No proof that he didn’t either.”

“We’ll keep looking.”

“We are assuming Will isn’t cooperating, that he’s flirting with Hannibal to help you, like he did before.”

“Is that a question?” Jack huffs.

“Looking for confirmation, Jack. That’s all. Aren’t we testy today.”

Jack ignores the comment. Price is as prickly and tired as he is. “I just want answers, Jimmy. Hannibal will not be flirted with again.”

“Another question is – why did Hannibal leave the drawings here I mean, he left the drawings out for Will. He had Will over for dinner. But was he expecting you to find them? Or Du Maurier? Was he forced to leave them behind or was it deliberate?”

“He could have destroyed them before. He left his drawings in Baltimore because Will had exposed him, damage done.” Jack rubs at his eyes.

The more they find, the more guilt clings to Will. The more they find the less secure Jack is in following any one lead. They keep opening one Pandora’s box after another. The case is unraveling with all the twists and turns Hannibal continues to throw in Jack’s path. Jack suspects Will has thrown his fair share of curve balls at him, too.

“But all this…” Price pauses, “this is so private.”

“And all in their own private code. This time, he’s flaunting what he is. No…he doesn’t care who sees it. As long as Will does. Hannibal is…outing Will. Or Will is letting him think that…”

“Jack, it’s possible it’s not unrequited anymore.”

Jack grunts in agreement. “The thought has crossed my mind.”

“Your trap in Baltimore cost him. You think this is payback? Ruin Will and you go down with him. You can’t insulate yourself from the fallout if this blows up.”

“He lost a lot, but I’m betting revenge is not the angle here. Maybe we were a trio before, but I am definitely the third wheel this time around. I am aware the communication between them is below my radar, and you may be on to something here. “

“Will’s empathy.”

“He’ll get inside Hannibal’s head, see himself like…that. Like whatever the drawings are supposed to suggest.”

“He’s already in Hannibal’s head. If I thought of this, Will has. And he didn’t mention it. I can see why he wouldn’t want to, but I’m thinking there was more of this sort of symbolism in the tableaux, too.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. Hannibal has him all twisted up again. Loneliness. Empathy. Compassion. An insurance policy for Hannibal.”

“He’s got a soft spot for Will. He’s removing the chink in his armor.”

“At least neutralizing it. Something else…did we account for all Ruggerio’s organs?”

“Let me check…”

Jack paces while he waits.

“Confirmed shoulder flesh missing and kidneys unaccounted for. But get this...the heart was split in half and ho! It was stuffed with eagle feathers, Jack.”

“I’m just hearing about this now? Dante, Zeus, and hearts again. Does Will know that?”

“Doubtful. He was taken to the hospital. Unless you showed him subsequent forensics.”

“I didn’t. Let me ask you…why the classical mythology, Greek in particular? Hannibal, I can see it. But Will. I don’t recall seeing any classical lit at his house…”

“Did you ever look? I mean really, Jack. You hardly ever got past the front porch.”

“No, I didn’t. And his stuff was cataloged after Hannibal escaped. Nothing was confiscated except his freezer and Tier’s creature suit, but I never checked the report.”

“Will’s job was to get in his head. Will had his therapy sessions, but there is a lot of unaccounted for time. Whatever drives Hannibal’s pathology is reflected in his hobbies and interests. Just as much as his choices of professions.”

“If Will wasn’t up on his classical lit before meeting Hannibal, he got a crash course. There’s something compelling about Greek mythology and it is connected specifically to his relationship with Will.”

"I would say exclusively with Will. There's nothing in the Ripper that points to this kind of focused symbolism or imagery."

"There's not any symbolism. The Ripper was offended. He passed judgement and amused himself with the…art of the presentation. And preserving his anonymity."

"And eating the offenders. Cronus ate his own children…"

"Jimmy…." Jack says before Price can digress again. Clearly Price finds Hannibal's Classical obsession fascinating. "As the Ripper, Hannibal never copied or alluded to works of art before. Or literature."

"As far as we know." Price reminds him.

"Will said Hannibal could have changed his signature to reflect his new home here in Florence. That may be true but it doesn't change his pathology. And I think Will knows exactly what that pathology is."

"Judging by the paintings, Jack, he knows that pathology intimately." Jimmy pauses, "Ah…my friend in warm places is calling."

"I'll wait, but make it quick. Please."

Jack glances around the lot and into the woods where flashlight still wave in the darkness, the hunt for evidence marches on. So does his headache. It marches like a parade from the back of his skull down his stiff throbbing neck. He clicks his tongue against the roof of his pasty mouth and figures he is dehydrated, the likely culprit for the current thudding in his head. Jack reaches in the car window and waves at Zeller to hand him a bottle of water.

The water is tepid, but Jack drinks anyway immediately missing the cold refreshing snap he had been looking forward to. He taps his finger against the plastic thinking of all the puzzle pieces he has been handed. The feeling that he is being yanked around will not go away. Neither is the feeling particularly new. He can accept the yanking from Hannibal. Will presents a different emotional dilemma for Jack as he usually does.

His compassion for Will does not exceed his misgiving. Will had been conflicted and compromised back home. He had omitted important information, culpability issues notwithstanding. His reputation had suffered in the wake of his murder trial and he had been in limbo professionally because of it. He had distanced himself from Jack, had kept Jack in his confidence on his terms. Jack remembers all the unanswered phone calls and the drives out to Wolf Trap to find his house empty except for the dogs. Jack had driven to Chandal Square on occasion, too, but Will's car had not been in the area as far as he could tell and he had talked himself out of slapping a GPS on his Volvo more than once.

Even when Will had answered his calls, he had not been all that forthcoming and Jack had received the distinct impression he had interrupted something. Then again, Will has never been a paragon of social grace. There is one morning in particular Jack remembers being especially peeved. He had been calling from the Natural History Museum about Randall Tier's tableau. He had wanted both Hannibal and Will on the scene and had called Will first. Will had been terse, almost dismissive. Nothing out of the ordinary, but he had phoned Hannibal next. Hannibal had repeated what Will had just said albeit with his usual cheerfulness, but the phrasing had been almost, if not exactly verbatim.

Jack is reminded too of the near complete lack of remorse demonstrated by Will after the blood bath at Hannibal's house. Will had never offered an outright apology, though Jack has to concede that he never offered an apology either. He had initially dismissed Will's flat demeanor as part of his trauma. Given their professions, Will is as capable as Jack of concealing his emotions. But as the weeks and months had worn on, Jack had begun to think that he and Hannibal had cooked up the dinner invitation together. That Will had been playing both sides…perhaps not even consciously. Jack thinks Will had considered him expendable.

The thought had not come easily and Jack is not proud of himself for thinking it. As much for what it says about Will as it says about him. Will empathizes with anyone by his own admission. Jack had been counting on his empathy with Hannibal to catch Hannibal. But Will had been empathizing with Jack, too. If Will had thought Jack expendable, Jack can blame himself to a degree. He had been thinking the same of Will. He still does. And Will is still empathizing with him. And, he is again empathizing with Hannibal, if he ever stopped. Jack does not have to be struck on the head with a hammer to understand the implications of Will filtering Jack's emotions through Hannibal's lens.

He turns his thoughts to the drawings and the dining room in Impruneta. Hannibal had presented Will with a kaleidoscope of images and sensations, much like sending a child with ADHD into an amusement park. Confronted with the equivalent of candy, lights, and noise, Will's mind must have been scrambled with associations and saturated with sentiments. He would have absorbed them all, manufactured or not. Hannibal had made his own table arrangements in Baltimore, had arranged every detail of his dinner parties, but none had been as personal, as intimate as the setting Jack had seen in Impruneta. Scaled down certainly, but Jack had felt like he had walked into a chapel containing relics and offerings of a sacred secret religion.

"Got the goods right here." Jimmy's voice pops into Jack's ear.

"Well?" Jack says, draining the last of the water.

"He confirmed the account registered as Mariah W. Gillam. I have the details I'll send to you. But…"

"But what?" Jack's stomach rolls with the thought of more headache inducing interference.

"There's a second account we need to look at."

"A second account. Du Maurier only mentioned the one." Jack sighs, turns, and strums his fingers along the empty bottle.

"I don't know if we were supposed to find the other account. But the name…"

"Another anagram?"

"Oh yes. But not for Will. The other account belongs to, or was opened for a Demuri Baudelaire."

Jack stops rapping on the bottle. "Baudelaire?"

"Jack, it's an anagram for…"

"Bedelia Du Maurier."

Jack stares out into the field of flashlights and jackets. He hurls the nearly empty water bottle into the matted grass and catches Zeller's startled expression as he peers over his laptop out the windshield. The pieces of this horrendously huge mess are scattered all over the place and Jack is mystified how they all add up. The randomness is not incidental, but deliberate and Jack knows Hannibal is orchestrating all of it. Which means nothing is as it appears and nothing is beginning to look like what Jack is going to be left with…again.

"Excuse me, Agent Crawford?"

"What?" Jack says too sharply as he turns around. "Just a minute, Jimmy."

Large brown eyes blink repeatedly beneath the visor of a cap bearing the name of the courier service. The courier is young, early twenties if that and she apparently drove out here alone and picked her way around all the *Polizia* and FBI personnel trying to find him. He notices the FBI agent standing off to the side. Jack nods and the agent folds his arms over his chest, waiting.

Jack turns to the girl, frowns, sighs in apology for his curtness.

"Sorry. Long day. Yes, I'm Jack Crawford. Do you need ID?"

The young woman looks at his badge, glances around the chaotic crime scene and shakes her head. She presents a chrome tablet, holds it out to Jack.

"No, just sign here."

Jack takes the tablet, smiling as he does deciding she has a lovely accent and signs his name. She barely looks at the signature and pulls an envelope sealed in plastic wrap from the small bag that hangs at her side. Jack examines the envelope. There is no return address; in fact except for the company label affixed to the plastic, the envelope is completely blank.

"Do you know who sent it?"

"I don't. The office might. I just deliver. The label was written by someone at the office."

"Isn't that kind of odd?"

"Not really. People use us to deliver all kinds of things. Gifts, keys, lots of stuff. Sometimes people want to be…discreet. Secret. You know?"

"Yes, I do." Jack says, mind churning out possible senders and settling on one. "Would you be kind enough to wait here while I open it?"

"I really can't. More deliveries, but I will give you my cell. Is that okay?"

"Good enough."

She scribbles down a number on a spare envelope she retrieves from her bag and hands if off. Jack reaches in his pocket, takes out his wallet and holds out several Euros of appreciable denomination. The jean clad courier smiles broadly as she slips the bills into her pocket.

"*Grazie, grazie.*"

Jack waves for the agent to escort her out and once the two of them have disappeared into the throng of agents, Jack begins to pull on his gloves to remove the plastic from his envelope.

“Jack?” Zeller calls from the window.

“Jack?” Price’s voice echoes in his ear.

“Just a minute…” He says into the phone while looking at Zee.

Jack sets the wrapping on the hood of the car. “Zee, get me a couple evidence bags.”

Soon, Jack is spreading the contents of the envelope over the hood. He stares at the odd assortment of items that at first glance seem like they had been collected from a scavenger hunt. He unfolds the thick antique stationary and his mouth goes dry as he reads the message in handwritten script, bold elegant strokes he has seen before. On dinner invitations.

Happy hunting, Jack.

His headache cranks up a notch as he examines the items, Zee standing beside him snapping on his gloves.

“What the…?” Zee says, fingering the stiff ecru parchment.

“Fuck.” Jack says. “What the fuck indeed.”

Jack looks down upon a pretty postcard from *Villa Fiore*, a winery in Fiesole, the sort easily purchased from their gift shop, a feather, and a VISA receipt from a local camera shop for none other than Freddie Lounds.

“Jack, that looks like one of the feathers from the Boboli crime scene.”

“It certainly does.” Jack shakes his head. “And there's a strand of blonde hair wrapped around it. Jimmy? Are you listening?”

“Yes, Jack.”

“Finish telling me about the Cayman accounts and then coordinate with Zee on this gift I just received.”

“Gift from who?”

“Hannibal. And he wants to play parlor games with us.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes Chapter 82
But Love awakened her, and of my heart, aflame, he humbly made her, fearful, taste… Dante, Vita Nouva, Sonnet from Chapter III

Will and Hannibal recall verses from Michelangelo’s Poem, Love the Light-Giver

Everyone has the right to risk his own life to preserve it. Will loosely quotes from Jean Jacque Rousseau, On the Social Contract, 1762.

Better to shun the bait than struggle in the snare. William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.
Let no one come near me. I must smell scorched I’m sure. Hallucinations are without number. Arthur Rimbaud, Night of Hell

The chapter count is my best estimate, but I wanted to provide a sense of scope.

Still to come: Jack contacts Bedelia. Bedelia makes her move. Daniel arrives at the predetermined intersection, both literally and figuratively, veering ever closer to the event horizon of chaos. Pazzi arrives at his house to find that Fate has followed him there.

Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will grapple with the logistics of intimacy amidst injuries and hallucinations. Bedelia begins her exit strategy abetted by a fateful phone call with Jack. Pazzi arrives at his house to find that Fate has followed him there. Daniel arrives at the predetermined intersection, both literally and figuratively, veering ever closer to the event horizon of chaos.

“I have never felt more alive than when I am with you.” Will’s fingers brush absently at his hair, “You were my paddle once…”

“It’s a different boat, a different stream this time.”

“Not a stream. The wailing river Cocytus. You want to join me in my inferno? Here’s your invitation.”

“Invitation accepted. I already brought my paddle.”

“Of course you did. You can’t wait to get in here.” Will points to his head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 83

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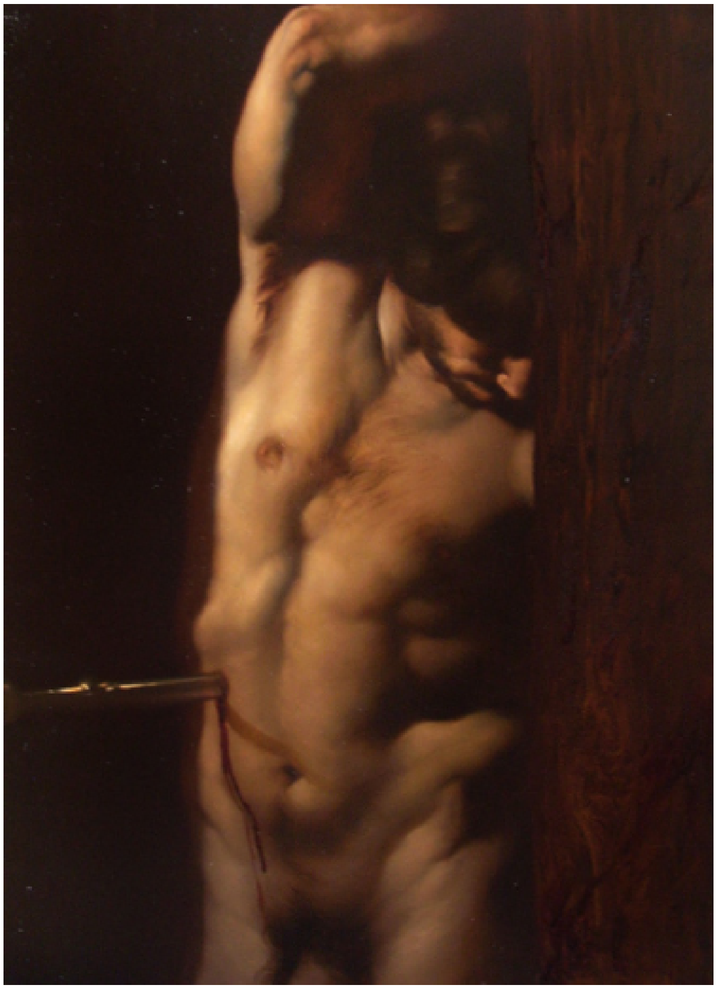


Saint Sebastian, Roberto Ferri

With your fair eyes a charming light I see, For which my own blind eyes would peer in vain; Stayed by your feet the burden I sustain Which my lame feet find all too strong for me; Wingless upon your pinions forth I fly; Heavenward your spirit stirreth me to strain; E'en as you will, I blush and blanch again, Freeze in the sun, burn 'neath a frosty sky. Your will includes and is the lord of mine; Life to my thoughts within your heart is given; My words begin to breathe upon your breath: Like to the moon am I, that cannot shine Alone; for lo! our eyes see nought in heaven Save what the living sun illumineth.

Love the Light Giver, or Veggio co' bei vostri occhi. Michelangelo Buonarroti *, 1534*

Though hardly a wilting rose in his arms, Will's lips do resemble swollen buds of dark crimson, the blushing petals tantalizing close. Even the air tingling across Hannibal's skin sizzles with Will's musky sweat. Like the flush of heat trailing that first swallow of whiskey Will's mouth moves over his throat, a roiling wet fire licking every nerve following the contours of his jaw then cheek to pause at his mouth. Hannibal wastes no more time wanting when the having is right there…to be had. Catching a blaze of blue before he shuts his eyes, he smashes his bruised lips against Will's mouth. The petals part in an exquisite blooming of flesh and Hannibal feels the scoring of teeth along his tongue.

The sense of being pliant clay in Hannibal's hands is persistent and not unwelcome. Indeed, Will's body shifts with the touching until their bodies seem to entwine of their own accord, a perfect fit. He pulls at handfuls of hair until Hannibal growls, his tongue a blade at the back of Will's throat. Will decides he might enjoy the ravaging more if his mouth had not felt the brunt of so many boots and knuckles. Regardless, his cock thrums inside his boxers, the thrumming augmented by the intermittent whiffs of blood mixed with sweat and sandalwood assailing his nostrils. All of it powerfully stimulating and topped off with fumes of adrenaline.

Hannibal's kisses are deep, penetrating, shots of scorching liquid flame filled with the longing Will had experienced while walking among the rooms at his villa in Impruneta. It is a taste he knows well. Wildly, wantonly Will pulls the tongue in, slurps and sucks so delight and desire ripple through him and his cock throbs against the pulsing cock grinding into him. He is pressed so far into the bark of the tree he is gasping for air.

As he slides his mouth along Hannibal's bottom lip teasing the sensitive bed of nerves there, his own face prickles with the touching. Hannibal moans, a pleased purring sound that hums in his throat as he nibbles very lightly on Will's lower lip before sucking it into his mouth. The touch of the surgeon is felt in every caress of the hands cradling his head as thumbs depress the hollow of his cheeks, delicately so as not to aggravate his wound, sensuously enough to send more shivers below.

Will's mouth is as ravenous as his own and Hannibal opens his mouth wider so the cub can take his fill. Will groans shuddering as he swallows Hannibal's tongue practically sucking down tonsils in the process. Hannibal allows Will to take and revel in the taking before pressing incisors to the plump bottom lip, prompting an abrupt withdrawal.

"Too tender? You used to enjoy a little nibble." Hannibal gently taunts licking a trickle of blood from his lips.

Will used to enjoy it without a split lip but, the bite was not especially painful; the shift in tone was disruptive. Will thinks Hannibal has some idea how close to losing it he is. Will only folded into his chest spilling a basket of crazy mere moments ago. Will reminds himself his beloved beast does like to bite.

With one arm still wrapped around Hannibal's neck, Will wipes his mouth and looks down at the blood smeared on his hand. Frowns slightly. Remembers Hannibal standing in the doorway of his storage room on the third floor as Will had moved his fingers over a textured canvas…Hannibal's visceral rendering of Dali's *Sacrament of the Last Supper* rendered with actual viscera.

Take, eat, this is my body…

Sacrament or seduction?

Why not both?

He blinks with the memory still staring into the red creases of his palm and he is transported to Daniel's patio looking at Luciano's blood beneath his fingernails, to the jagged slippery knife clenched in his fist in the alley, to the floor of the slaughter house listening to Cordell gurgle beside him and finally to his living room as he had knelt over Randall Tier.

The cup I lift you up to bear has already passed between our lips.

More blood and breath to fuel my radiance…

Will shakes his head, tries to focus on the moment. “Still do. That wasn’t nibbling. That was tenderizing.” Will says absently, stubbornly examining his hand though a slow smile spreads over his lips.

“A sprig of zest.” Hannibal returns, enjoying himself immensely.

He leans in for another taste, Will is already grabbing his collar but as Will lifts his head, he halts. Lips part and his breath hitches in his throat before he can adjust. Will stares into the red rimmed eyes of his infernal companion, blazing amber peers again from Hannibal’s face. Will pulls back and his fingers let go of the collar. He licks thoughtfully at his mouth, pondering the creature. It dips its bloody beak into glossy plumes, its breath like steam upon Will’s face.

You see the wine. Still thirsty?

Immediately noticing the glassy eyed glaze and the slack jaw, Hannibal grips the back of Will’s head and assumes the dignified aura and tone of psychiatrist once again as Will slumps against the tree trunk. The body remembers its conditioning. The mind will catch up eventually.

“Will, what do you see?”

I see…you…

Hannibal grabs Will by the shoulders shaking him a little. Will blinks repeatedly and Hannibal stares into a wide eyed turbulent sea of blue. Will’s jaw pulses as the eyes flash and Hannibal sees the same stubbornness etched into every line of Will’s upturned face he evinced earlier as he had leaned on the Ducati. So infuriating that he clings to these…habits.

Hannibal swallows allowing Will the moment to adjust his thinking. Reticence is to be expected. It does not yet feel natural to entrust Hannibal with his inner most thoughts. Deceit may no longer be one of the dishes they serve to each other, but Will’s inclination to protect his mind and keep its disturbing images secreted in his skull persists. *Patience.*

Will twists his shoulders knowing Hannibal can’t see what he sees; cannot see the downy sheen that has enfolded his body though the vision is arresting for Will nonetheless. He feels feathers prickle down his chest, between his legs to ripple up his back. Shuddering a little, he looks aside to avoid Hannibal’s inquisitive gaze. Will can’t tell whose plumes belong to whom.

You have to drink from the cup, Will.

I’m holding your damned cup.

Then, drain the cup.

“You’re hallucinating.”

What kind of crazy are you?

“What else is new?” Will huffs, cock throbbing insanely inside his trousers.

“Tell me what you see.”

“What? Now?”

Hannibal kneads the tense shoulders Will holds so rigidly the stiffness runs clear to curled fingers, but Will’s jaw tightens more and he shakes his head.

“Will…” Hannibal rubs his cheek against the tousled head. “Who knows his creation better than the creator?”

“Um...his hallucinations?”

The talons around Will’s shoulders tighten as the miserable pressure surges in his chest, a cresting wave that sends the blood vessels in his head to swell and he wonders if this is what an aneurysm feels like.

The twinge of an indulgent smile tugs at the corner of Hannibal’s mouth as he wonders what visions swim in the troubled blue pools. Will is still stumbling through the transition and he obviously requires a little nudge. He’s overstimulated, very aroused, and his body clamors for release.

“Will.” Hannibal says patiently, “I have always known who you are. You are allowing me to see. How does it feel? Revealing yourself.”

“Still…uncomfortable.” Will wriggles between the tree and Hannibal, nerves white hot beneath his skin.

“Necessary.”

“Inevitable.”

“Truth resonates between us.” Hannibal touches his forehead to Will’s.

“In every word, every note…” Will rasps, as his heart thuds so loudly Hannibal must hear it.

Do you revel? Or do you fear?

Hannibal cups Will’s chin in his hand and rolls his thumb over the stubble and the bruised lips. Will leans into the familiar touch, aware of the conditioning and unable to alter his spontaneous response. The conditioning is part of him. A part of him he does not despise. Or fear. Not anymore.

Tell me what you want.

The talons hook around his neck pulling him close so Will is breathing feathers. He closes his eyes as his mouth collides with Hannibal’s and the tender nerves explode again. Will sees the sparks fly though his eyes are tightly shut and he feels shocks like tiny firecrackers down to his toes. A guttural growl rumbles deep in his throat as pain mingles with desire.

“I want…this.” Will mutters, not sure if he is actually saying the words or thinking them.

Still twisting in his inferno, he digs into the broad shoulders until he feels flesh beneath the feathers, and cognizant of Hannibal’s wound, drops his right hand from the soiled bandage to settle on meaty triceps instead. Hannibal’s arms seem real enough, but he’s not sure because the wings folded at his back feel real, too. The hands that had squeezed his jugular to within an inch of his life now move over his body delivering deliciously tormenting touches upon nipples then navel to grasp at his hips, thumbs circling the nobs of bone on either side. He looks and sees talons dripping with blood.

I want to get out of my head…

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

Hannibal gazes into Will's blood smeared face. He knows Will is fatigued beyond reason, his mind sifting and drifting behind the pools of pale blue, his body currently keyed to adrenaline and lust, a synchronous melody they share. Hannibal wants to be sure it is not his longing and desire that tumbles now from Will's tongue, but Will's. Clearly, Will is straddling more than one reality at the moment and when it comes to *this*, ambiguity will not do.

"To what are you referring exactly?" Hannibal chides as Will huffs an exasperated sigh. "You'll have to disambiguate…*this*. You've managed to make a definite article indefinite."

Will knows by the way Hannibal nuzzles his jaw he is teasing, but beneath the ill-timed grammar lesson is a gentle appeal for clarity. Will almost laughs aloud thinking clarity in short supply. Hannibal is, by nature, most literal. Including the puns. Especially his puns. It is natural he would want specificity from Will at this…particular juncture.

"I apologize for my unintended vagary. You're not making this…" Will winces at his verbal stumbling, "easy…"

"Same this…or different this?" Hannibal asks, unable to resist. He squeezes the flesh of Will's hip, a gentle prompt.

Will can practically feel him smiling into his neck. He lifts his head and huffs another frustrated sigh though it is really all for show. He has missed this…this whatever it is they have. He looks into Hannibal's face.

"This…rare gift." Will says tone somber and he blinks eyes that probably appear as drawn and tired as they feel.

"You would be referring to my gift of friendship." Hannibal's hands find the scar threading above the navel and he lets his thumb float over the raised flesh that tightens at his touch.

"Yes. That gift."

Hannibal grasps Will's neck, strokes a thumb again across stubble, the sensation of whiskers, these whiskers bending to his touch he finds absolutely mesmerizing. The tenuous friendship they might have enjoyed back in the beginning is gone, could never have survived the deceptions anyway. They have spent the last couple of years in a constant battle with each other and Will has always come back swinging at everything Hannibal has thrown at him, climbed every wall Hannibal erected only to erect his own walls and throw his own punches that have sent Hannibal reeling. Hannibal supposes that stripping off the suit and realizing there are open gates along the walls must feel strange to Will.

It certainly feels strange to Hannibal. But Hannibal adapts more easily, welcoming the different and the new. Will does not. Hannibal is accustomed to change from time to time out of necessity, always having to make a new place his own. Will, by contrast, avoids change and stays in one place letting the roots grow deep into the soil. His trip to Florence has uprooted everything he knows, or thinks he knew about himself. He is still processing the last few days and hours. To entertain a future with Hannibal is beyond even Will's formidable imagination.

Will has been frustrated, frustrated enough to seek therapy. He has been slugging it out in his inferno; his hallucinations follow him even here. Hannibal thinks especially here. Dreams prepare us for waking life and Will has been dreaming and fighting for a very long time. He hates to lose. Hates to lose as much as Hannibal and for this reason, Hannibal needs to know that Will does not perceive the having as a defeat, but a beginning.

The pale blue eyes shimmer, the torment Hannibal had seen swimming there before has been banished somewhere deep. Hannibal imagines the turbulence he sees stirring is the splashing of the beads as they fall from that rosary of fear Will wears around his neck.

"Do you know what you're getting yourself into, this time?" Hannibal says, his tone serious bordering on imperious.

"Do you?" Will returns evenly, matching Hannibal's arrogance but the tone…is all his own.

No stolen moment is this, but truly a beginning. Encouraged, Hannibal tugs at the tattered fabric and Will yields one smooth shoulder then the other so Hannibal can strip the soiled shirt from him. Baring torso, he leaves the sleeves to gather at his elbows enjoying Will's expression as he realizes he is even less mobile than he was a moment ago.

Will glances down. If having his body pinned against the tree weren't arousing enough, restraining his arms with his own shirt was a master stroke. The pose is oddly reminiscent of something else. He doesn't have long to dwell on this new development however, as Hannibal's fingers play over Will's perspiring flesh, brushing over his ribs as though caressing the fine mahogany of his piano. The melody between them ripples as Hannibal caresses his pectorals, the delight in his eyes obvious and Will's chest swells in response, nipples harden with the persistent touching.

Pinning Will against things is only one of the many delights in having him. Hannibal had savaged him relentlessly against every door in his house he thinks, and the Bentley once or twice. The bed goes without saying. The blue eyes taunt him from beneath the thick lashes and Hannibal presses Will into the bark nearly lifting him off his feet. Hannibal reaches between Will's legs. The cock is rock hard pulsing beneath the fabric of the trousers that simply have to come off.

Hannibal gropes relentlessly until Will grunts with pleasure all the while grinding his hips against him as he grabs the soiled trousers. Creased they are and stiff with drying blood but so sticky with sweat they cling to Will's legs, the contour of the muscles delightfully delineated. Hannibal allows his gaze to wander as he unhooks the clasp and guides the disobliging zipper down.

This is not the pristine body Hannibal had lifted from his bathtub in Impruneta or had laid out along the ground in Boboli Gardens. Will's torso is caked with blood, his arms are smeared with it and the mottled splotches of deep pink evince the dark bruises to come. The trousers are especially truculent, hugging hips and thighs partly because of the boxers Will insists on wearing and partly because of the impressive erection crammed within the folds of twisted fabric. Hannibal has to yank with some force, feeling vaguely like a flustered teenager.

A shaky gasp erupts as trousers, and then boxers finally slip to the ground. Hannibal stares at scuffed feet and jagged toenails as Will shoos the heap of clothing away. His cock quivers as Will draws another trembling breath, the timorous exhale causing hairs to rise along the back of Hannibal's neck. Hannibal looks up into a swirling sea of blue. Will is absolutely sublime as he leans against the tree, shirt trailing from arms hopelessly pinned to his sides, palms up in a helpless gesture of surrender awaiting rapture.

Hannibal is certain Will will make the connection quickly. Revealing his flesh to Hannibal is but a part of all that Will is and Hannibal would have all of him. Hannibal wants egress to those places Will forbids him to follow. But Will understands their quid pro quos. His imagination will ascribe the desired emotions and associations with the pose and his empathy with Hannibal will produce the requisite sense of reciprocity.

Will looks down at the kneeling Hannibal, a vision of blonds braids tickles his thighs, knows his fingers would sink into flaxen softness if he could reach that far. Heat radiates between them and awareness, too. Will is very self-aware and the blush he feels as the dark luminous eyes sweep over his body is not entirely unpleasant. Hannibal has seen him naked many times. Will thinks many, many times. And he has looked at Will with this same penetrating gaze before.

Associations come quickly. Memory stirs, fragments of lying in bed listening to Hannibal read Italian poetry float around his skull the images diaphanous as a spider's web and Will grasps at the web but it slips away impossible to hold against the barrage of other more pressing associations. Will glances down at his bound arms, upturned palms, and stiff cock sticking out from the thicket of dark curls. It twitches deliciously with the brush of Hannibal's whiskers and then lips.

…this is the beauty they could not hold.

"I know what you s…see." Will hisses, tongue against teeth.

"Do you?"

"Your drawings… of Saint Sebastian you left out for me. The arrow… in each drawing plunges into the same place, identical in position to the… wound you carved into me. You pierced Ruggerio's body the same way."

"Yes. I wanted you to see. Why did I draw them?" Hannibal asks, still patient despite the typically querulous tone perhaps due to the proximity of Hannibal's mouth to his testicles.

"I don't..." Will gasps, "I don't know. To see you?" Will thinks of the loneliness that had bled from every room of the villa, tears leached from its very walls. "So I would know how much you missed me, empathize, feel sympathy…"

Hannibal nips along the stiff cock at his lips, pinches the flesh of the tensed inner thigh until Will whines in protest.

"No…think." Hannibal says, "You never could see yourself in my drawings. It's no secret between us I find you beautiful, Will. Why would I display for you everything I have drawn since arriving in Florence?"

Hannibal buries his face into the thatch of black hair to help those associations along. He lets his tongue slip over the hardened flesh, licks around the base and pulls the silky purse hanging beneath into his mouth. He feels the shudders ripple along Will's body as he whines, a soft tremulous whimpering escapes with every touch of his tongue. He finds Will's scent here in the most private of places indescribably feral and the taste of his flesh ignites a primal sort of hunger.

A bewildering array of images fills Will's mind as he gazes at the ever shifting form kneeling before him. He sees the beauty of his beleaguered body as Hannibal does; the same tortured beauty Hannibal had etched into every line of his Saint Sebastian drawings looms above him. But Hannibal's fascination with his physical attributes is merely the veneer. Emotions stir within Will as the mystifying imagery of Hannibal's other drawings sift through his consciousness more cobwebs to clutter his mind.

You look but still you do not see.

You think I'm afraid. I'm not.

Stop looking in the wrong corner for your answers.

Another emotion tingles inside and it catches like a spark in the charged air between them. The ensuing heat courses through limbs clear to his scalp. Will knows he feels the burn of shame on his cheeks, the shame they had spoken of before. Allowing Hannibal to see him is not nearly as difficult as looking at himself.

Hannibal doubts Will sees all of the connections lying buried beneath the layers of circuitry lining his skull. If he'd *had* any inkling before, Hannibal would not have left him alive on his kitchen floor. He holds an imago of Hannibal, keeps it close even as he trudges through his inferno. Right now, he's trying to see Hannibal's imago of him, unsure if what he sees is a projection or a reflection but he looks through the haze of his inferno not from the place he occupies in the universe they would share. He has only begun to travel the orbit of that universe.

"You are used to using your empathy with me against me." Hannibal drags his tongue over the delectable feast of flesh.

"You're…manipulating my empathy."

"And you are aware that I do. Would it be so disconcerting to discover our imagoes are not so different?"

Will has no intention of confessing anything about his imago, let alone the fantasies inspired by Hannibal's drawings. Not now as he stands in the pit of his inferno while the devil washes his balls with his tongue. He is confounded enough without inviting more hallucinations to contend with the ones currently crashing through his consciousness. It is the imago Hannibal holds of him that is so disconcerting at the moment. Like Hannibal himself, his ideal is typically and ridiculously epic. Will bites his lip as he gazes at Hannibal. He supposes cavorting on the beaches of ancient Troy in a Greek chiton qualifies as somewhat…epic.

"Achilles and Patroclus. Gods and Saints."

"We hold imagoes of each other. You feed my fantasies as I feed yours."

"You *fed* me the *Iliad* back in Baltimore. Reinforced it in Impruneta."

"Did you line your suit of me with your imago or have you kept it for yourself?"

"That's…a loaded calculus; not a fair assessment…"

"I'll offer another. Does the imago you cherish walk with you in your inferno?"

“There are many versions of you there…here.” Will admits licking his lips.

“Then ask; what is the nature of my fear? Your inferno is constructed according to your design. Its images fractured pieces of self.”

Hannibal’s words echo what Daniel has already told him. His mind is speaking to him in images as it always has but Will has buried its blueprint, its score sunken deep in his subconscious. There is a melody swelling in the pit of his inferno. He heard it *pianissimo* with Daniel and it thunders now *fortissimo*. His hallucinating may have been unleashed by the drugs he’s received, but sensitive orchestration of carbon that he is, the music vibrates most forcefully and loudly when he is with Hannibal.

Will twists his head, tries to shake the images their conversation has conjured away so he can concentrate. Thoughts flow, swim like trout and it’s difficult to hold on to any one for long in the slippery stream.

“We um…talked about that…”

“Will?” Hannibal looks at the contorted face, understands Will is trying to focus. “In your therapy with Daniel, were you able to identify which fear fuels your inferno?”

Will winces, looks aside. “There are so many…it’s like throwing darts.”

Hannibal nods. Identifying one fear only leads to another and another. Hannibal thinks Will has existed in fear for so long he wouldn’t know how to behave if he suddenly didn’t feel it. Hannibal would like very much to witness such a moment.

“There is a bridge between fantasy and fear in your inferno. Images born of empathy and trauma. Who better than I to help you cross that bridge?”

“No one more suited than the source of the trauma.” Will says quietly.

“Are you accusing me of something?” Hannibal chides.

“Not accusing.” Will sighs, “A little humor to coat the truth. I could have walked away and I didn’t.”

“Neither of us very reasonable.” Hannibal agrees.

“Your drawings,” Will says, unwilling to cut a deal with the devil just yet though he makes it sweeter with every pass of his tongue along his cock. “Not just for me. For you. You want me to let you in…even more. You want my fractured pieces.”

“I let you know me, see me, Will. Would you deny me the same?”

“But you would never take from me more than I am willing to give.” Will reminds him.

“I can be very patient.” Hannibal draws his tongue emphatically from base to tip.

“So can I. I see you very clearly, Hannibal. Your drawings are a window you purposely left open. I see you and your…expectations.”

Hannibal lets the swollen prize slip from his mouth and licks at the blood seeping from the cuts in his lips. “You still presume to know my expectations?”

“Your expectations are hardly…earthbound.” Will says.

Tsk. Tsk. Icarus didn’t fall because he looked up; he fell because he looked down.

Will blinks unsure if he heard Hannibal say the words in his head or in actual conversation. He knows Hannibal is analyzing every twitch, every breath, and every movement no matter how subtle. Will’s discomfort is as obvious as the bulge in his trousers.

“I’m just saying, holding me up so high, you might…be disappointed.” Will says.

“The only disappointment is, has ever been, your absence.”

Hannibal looks up gratified by the tired smile that greets him. He sinks his tongue into the moist flesh behind Will’s balls, pressing the ever sensitive places invariably sending Will to his tip toes. Will moans as Hannibal’s lips close around his cock, tongue flicking the slit until Will can stand it no longer. He bucks his hips pushing off from the trunk, and Hannibal takes the length of him in slow strokes at first, then faster as Will thrusts against the back of his throat.

Whether Will’s eyes are or open or shut his hallucinations intrude, causing his visual reality to shift constantly. His physical reality is quite consistent however and Will had not realized what an effective lubricant blood could be if one has the taste for it.

Hannibal has no problem with taste and Will reaps the benefits. He clenches his fists, a tingling pressure courses through his cock and with Hannibal prodding his prostrate he is sure he is about to come right there. But surety is a fleeting thing. As he moans and rocks against the sturdy shoulders, Hannibal grunts, more an angry growl and the shoulders give suddenly. His cock slips from Hannibal’s mouth with nothing but cool air to tease it.

Glancing down he sees a glint of aggravation in the dark eyes as Hannibal wipes his mouth. Hannibal meets his gaze, raises a dubious brow.

“Perhaps if you hadn’t kissed me with your knee…”

Will leans forward, offering a lop-sided smile and twisting his arms around behind his back awkwardly attempts to rid himself of the shirt. Hannibal hates admitting it, but he is not so impervious after all. Will knows it’s the gash in his thigh that has to be a painful bundle of nerves. Kneeling on the ground is not helping. Hannibal had used all the Lidocaine for his gunshot wound. It’s possible his shoulder is not numb anymore.

“You don’t…have…to explain.” Will rasps, still breathless.

Hannibal scoots back to give him some maneuvering room so he can strip off his shirt. Will looks at the pink tinged bandage as he tugs at the stubborn sleeves. He manages to rip the sleeve from one arm and he tugs it from his wrist leaving the ruined shirt to hang from his other arm. It trails the dirt as he reaches around front to grasp Hannibal by the shoulders delivering a deep open mouthed kiss.

He winces as he withdraws the sight of the creature’s wings encircling him too much and he pulls away, stumbles backward. He knows Hannibal noticed.

His curiosity about Will is all encompassing and it has not escaped Hannibal’s attention that Will has been finding it increasingly difficult to remain in the moment since their fight. As Will trips over his own feet in an attempt to navigate his inferno, the reasons for his avoidance earlier are now plain.

Will’s sense of touch is highly evolved and his emotions are easily stimulated by touching which is why he avoids intimacy. With sex, associations are in free fall, he loses control. But touching can also provide him with control. Will often uses tactile stimulation as a defense mechanism, to calm himself; touching things as he speaks to focus on texture or something, anything besides the associations tumbling in his head. Will knows Hannibal is aware of his tendencies, aware of Hannibal’s tendency to exploit. The physical intimacy here in the grove has triggered not only more intense associations, but has intensified his hallucinations. The potential loss of control is terrifying.

“You don’t build forts anymore, do you?”

The pained expression tells Hannibal all he needs to know.

“You don’t bother or you can’t?”

“Don’t…psychoanalyze me.” Will’s voice cracks unable to sustain the attempted barb.

“I am always psychoanalyzing you.”

Hannibal pauses and waits for Will to meet his gaze. He does. He walks back to stand beside Hannibal, ruffles Hannibal’s hair. He kneads at his lips as the mental editing ensues. Hannibal waits.

“I have never felt more alive than when I am with you.” Will’s fingers brush absently at his hair, “You were my paddle once…”

“It’s a different boat, a different stream this time.”

“Not a stream. The wailing river Cocytus. You want to join me in my inferno? Here’s your invitation.”

“Invitation accepted. I already brought my paddle.”

“Of course you did. You can’t wait to get in here.” Will points to his head.

“Among other places.” Hannibal says directing his gaze at Will’s bouncing cock.

“You pushed.” Will guides Hannibal’s head forward, a gentle prompt to nuzzle at his thighs.

“You pushed back.” Hannibal says, dropping a kiss. And another.

“I always do.”

Hannibal sits back on his heels, “Let the hallucinations come, Will. Like you did before, with Daniel?”

“Seems I’m always in therapy...”

Will sighs, pale blue eyes softening as the words fall from lips he bites immediately. The words sounded less grim in his head. He gazes over Hannibal's head at the circle of hell encroaching, flexes his shoulders impatiently, the weight of the wings persistent and distracting. He knows what will calm him. Hannibal wants to experience his inferno and he will. On Will's terms.

"You want me to suck your dick." Will says, deliberately playing with personal pronouns.

The thin lips curl in disdain. Will smiles at the feigned reproach slipping easily into this familiar game and he pulls the comfort it brings around him like a blanket.

Will's deft phrasing has the desired effect. Hannibal clucks his tongue even as the image of Will's often filthy mouth wrapped around his cock fills his head. He rises from the mossy ground noting the stiffness in his limbs and the fresh stab of pain as blood pumps to his upper thigh. He looks at Will, cocks his head to the side.

"As delightful as you make it sound, fellating may be asking too much of your mouth, Will."

"You can take down those pants a bit, can't you?" Will raises a brow. "So I can suck it really hard."

Without waiting for an answer, Will grabs the silver buckle at his waist and soon Hannibal is watching his Armani leather belt slide across the dirt into shadows. So infuriating…

Will hastily unbuttons Hannibal's fly and jerks the zipper down expecting a layer of silk underwear but finds a thicket of moist dark hair curling along bare pelvis and thighs. He meets Hannibal's unapologetically wicked gaze, shakes his head and yanks at the fabric and feathers he grasps in his hands.

It's becoming more difficult to concentrate with everything shifting and Will feels strangely giddy, almost intoxicated. Hannibal sinks to the ground and Will bites his tongue as Hannibal's cock rises up from the plush plumage. Insanity, he thinks but the spontaneous chuckle dies on his lips as he observes the dried blood on Hannibal's back from the myriad of gashes left by the Casaletto boy. He whistles softly as his fingertips trip delicately along the wounds.

Hannibal winces but savors the discomfort nonetheless. He would let Will tear his flesh from his bones if that is what Will wanted. He is reminded again of the vulnerability Will wrings from him and so easily it seems. The affection and tenderness so raw he knows in another life he would have flung Will to the ground ripped him apart and taken from him the heart he suffers to beat now against his chest. And though this infuriating being has cost him dearly, and tortured him to no end and will without a doubt continue to do so, in this life Hannibal cannot take back what he has already given. Will would hold Hannibal's heart even in death, his grip around it so tight that Hannibal doubts the wounds of such a permanent separation would ever heal.

This being the best of all possible worlds, Fate continues to cooperate in this life. Hannibal watches Will rip off the remains of his blood stained shirt from his arm and toss it aside, hopefully casting off the rosary of fear once and for all. God comes to answer Adam's unspoken prayers, reaching into his inferno to pluck the sad drops of fire from its barren fields and make of them a garland of grateful flowers.

Roses, Hannibal thinks as he pulls Will to him, caresses the flushed and feverish flesh beneath his fingers mindful of the thorns that will draw fresh blood should he hold the petals too tightly. He nudges the mess of curls as memory threads though his mind, a singular filament that finds its way to his chest. He lies back flat along the ground, Will sliding easily on top of him as though his body belonged there hitched to his hips.

Hannibal remembers standing behind Will in his kitchen in Wolf Trap, Mason drooling in the living room and he remembers the softly spoken words as he had hugged Will to his chest in an embrace not unlike this one.

“I can feel your heart beating.” Will says suddenly, pale blue eyes drilling into his.

“Your thoughts or mine?” Brows lift in surprise though Hannibal’s inquiry is calm.

“Hell if I know.” Will mutters twisting around to wriggle closer.

Hannibal sighs into the tousled mane slightly awed. He wonders how often Will’s gift had provided him with similar insight as they had sat facing each other in his office or assessing each other from across his dining room table.

He nuzzles Hannibal in the chest, nudging him backward enjoying the gruff growl as he capitulates, easing his bare back onto the ground, sand, whatever it is. Will yanks the trousers, chiton, feathers down as far as the bandage will allow and takes the swollen cock in his mouth. He draws the length in and out, luxuriating in its familiar contours and adjusting to its dimensions as flames lick at his feet. For a few moments, he actually believes he can suck Hannibal off successfully.

Every nerve in Hannibal’s body dances with anticipation as Will takes his cock between his lips. To have Will like this, to know he is not pretending or lying to himself brings such a sense of completeness. The aching below and in his chest is so sweet Hannibal can barely stand it. He fingers the soft curls and doesn’t even mind the sprinkling of dirt that falls onto his stomach. Will begins to suck in earnest, inviting Hannibal to thrust and his cock begins to thrum with the wet friction. He thrusts harder and Will takes it, but Hannibal can see he is barely managing from crying out, not in pleasure either.

“Not necessary.” Hannibal says starting from the dirt as Will drops his cock like dead weight, a flash of relief lights up his face, quickly corrected.

“But the intention is appreciated.” Hannibal adds quickly as Will wipes blood from the fresh cut that has opened along his swollen lip.

“This would be easier if everything…didn’t hurt.” Will says simply though frustration is beginning to wear at him.

“Do you remember our first encounter?” Hannibal asks as Will climbs on top of him.

“In Jack’s office?” Will pokes his tongue between his teeth, rolls his eyes.

Hannibal squeezes a handful of flinching butt cheek. “No…in my bed.”

“You bandaged my hand. I remember we showered after hacking up Tier in your basement.”

Will brushes his lips teasingly over Hannibal’s ear as Hannibal prickles at the touch and the callous jibe. Will knows Hannibal treasures the surgical tutorial over Tier’s corpse, considers it a most intimate encounter. He waits for the scathing retort that is sure to follow.

“Yes, after you tossed your kill on my dining room table.” Hannibal growls into Will’s neck.

"I think I know what you have in mind." Will grins.

The rumbling hum against his throat feels wonderful and Will slides his hips back and forth reveling in the gnawing that follows. Hannibal pushes him off, rolls him onto his back. His mind drifts as Hannibal's hand reaches between his thighs, pulls on his cock. The throbbing below competes with the pulsing pressure in his brain. He throws his head back and listens to the sounds of waves…

Looking at Will writhe on the ground in an apparent delirium, Hannibal remembers Will's nude body lying listless and cool on his bed after he had taken him from the bathtub. His still form had prompted images of Achilles washing Patroclus in preparation for his funeral bier. The moving parallel had guided Hannibal's hands as he had prepared Will for his tableau. The terrible longing had somehow been exacerbated by Will's physical presence, as though his villa had become a tomb, the body there but the spirit within it had departed.

As Hannibal gazes upon the splendid form laid out before him he notices the glass like quality Will's eyes have assumed. Since Will is already agreeably splayed beneath him, Hannibal digs a thumb into hamstrings and surrounding muscles working his way front and center. He licks his fingers and reaches the other hand underneath to moisten the tight cluster of muscle there knowing what an effective trigger that sensitive halo of flesh can be.

Will groans with the touching. A ruffling of feathers as plumes then fingers slide between his thighs. Hands are all over him, an especially scintillating kiss to the pulsing tip of his cock causes his hips to bolt from the ground. He hisses with pleasure and his fingers fold into fists in anticipation of the next volley.

Clouds move across the face of the moon and in the shifting of shadows Will sees the blonde braids and teasing smile of his youthful Achilles and the glimmering haze of his inferno fades to dust…to sand. Sunlight breaks in a dazzling display upon the dunes that surround them as far as the horizon and a broken smile erupts unbidden as Will gazes into the proud and handsome face floating in the sea of sparkling sand.

Not so doomed to fall am I? The Fates do indeed tell lies; Troy's ashes heaven bound float upon the skies.

"Whether beholden to the Fates or to your wishes; Patroclus returns with…grateful kisses." Will says.

"Will?" Hannibal says basking in the warmth he finds in the pale blue eyes, a bit befuddled by the impromptu poetry.

Will draws the handsome face close and Hannibal dips his fingers into Will's open and waiting mouth and Will eagerly drenches them. He watches through slits as Hannibal withdraws the slick fingers and takes both of their cocks in his hand and slowly begins to pump.

The stroking is blissfully sweet, insanely so, and Will clutches at shoulders as his cock grows longer, unbelievably harder with the rigorous grappling of flesh.

There are none sweeter I think. And tho' from my joyful pen our symphony flows 'tis ever you who draws the ink...

Hannibal grimaces with the squeezes to his shoulder. Searing pressure builds in his cock and as Hannibal ponders the source of the beatific smile Will wears, the smile contorts and the soft whines of imminent release erupt from lips pursed in fervent concentration.

Will digs his fingers into the warm sand, unwilling to shake off his hallucination, unwilling to allow *his* Achilles to withdraw from him as the apparition of Patroclus had slipped from Achilles' grasp to reside in his sorrowful dreams. Will lifts his eyes and bearded Hannibal's face comes into focus as his mind drifts back and forth. Judging from the besotted look on Hannibal's face Hannibal has been indulging his own imagination. The thought is somewhat comforting though insufficient to mitigate the awkwardness he feels at being caught in his hallucination.

"Let them come, Will…"

A sharing and a bearing of each other's secrets.

Will blinks, grimaces with the effort it takes to remain upon the damp moss and cool dirt beneath his back. He surrenders to his mind, lets it roll with the waves that splash upon his face. His hallucination beckons and Will would have his Achilles smother him with kisses and warm fragrant flesh...

Will…

Hannibal is aware Will is having a melt-down, enraptured by his imagination, entirely lost and evidently Patroclus is making love with his Achilles. Will continues to fascinate and delight. Trust does bloom.

If you would see the garden, you must reveal yourself, Will. All of yourself.

Let you…him have what is left of…me.

Grieve not for what is lost, for what could never be; instead rejoice, for what is left of thee lives in me.

Flesh rolls against flesh as the strokes come harder and faster. Will is smothered in feathers, cock caught in the grip of bloody talons. His heart hammers in his chest as nerves crackle like kindling, like the hiss and pop of flames. He sees the familiar fireplace behind Hannibal's head, their shadows flicker upon shades of blue striped wallpaper, and his knuckles glow wrapped in clean white gauze. He feels satin sheets slipping from his thighs, a shimmering chiton flecked with sand and saturated in surf.

He buries his face in Hannibal's sweaty neck, sobbing and breathless; hands and cocks a frenzy of flesh. Ripples then waves of pleasure course though him and he writhes against Hannibal's chest, clutches at Hannibal's shoulders in a savage embrace. He hears Hannibal cry out, feels the twitching of flesh and realizes that the hot gush he feels spurt onto his stomach and the wail that follows is his own. The talons and feathers seem to drip into his lap as Will trembles uncontrollably so dizzy with pleasure he's not sure if he is covered in blood or perhaps the ink from Hannibal's pen.

"Hannibal…" Will murmurs as his arms slip from Hannibal's neck. The blue irises disappear as his eyes roll up. Will's entire face goes slack as consciousness departs.

Hannibal’s cock twitches, body convulsing with the thunderous shocks of the release. His mind swims against the currents of pulsing pleasure, aware Will has dropped to the ground but helpless to do anything about it for the moment. Eventually the spasms cease and Hannibal comes to his senses once again.

Will lays on the ground, eyelids fluttering and mouth opened wide enough to catch flies. Grunting with the throbbing pain that has returned in the absence of the departing and decidedly more pleasurable sensations he kneels over Will, presses fingers to his jugular and checks his watch.

Will’s heart races, breath ragged still. Hannibal’s lips and nostrils twitch, the scent of sex and sweat invite a primal satisfaction as he gazes at the limp cock coiled between thighs glistening with their spent passion. Hannibal’s face flushes hot with the rush of blood from the heart thumping contentedly in his chest. He breathes as Will breathes, point and counterpoint, perfectly melodious. Hannibal brushes the wet curls from Will’s forehead.

He is mine.

Achilles has his Patroclus. Was there ever any doubt?

The weather forecast for Zurich looks promising Du Maurier decides as she closes the laptop and sips at the glass of dark red wine she warms in her hands. The freshly opened bottle of Domain Tempier sits on the counter, its spicy bouquet apparent even at this distance and Du Maurier’s thoughts vacillate between visions of the cottage she purchased outside of Marseille and of the grim faced Jack Crawford who still has not called.

The wine is a Provencal variety, an acquired taste to be sure unappreciated by the palate accustomed to fruitier varieties of grape. In happy anticipation of stepping off a plane in her new home, she had selected a bottle from the same region. She smacks her lips, the wine glosses over them like syrup, the flavor of the Mourvedre grape rich and full like swallowing a juicy piece of filet mignon, warm, wet, and very very rare.

The wine is one of Hannibal’s favorites for obvious reasons of taste. When paired with red meat, the gastronomic experience is utterly orgasmic. Her mind wanders invariably to what Hannibal might be up to at this very moment. More specifically, what he and Graham are up to.

She has not heard from Hannibal except indirectly through the ginger haired minx passed out in her bed. She is aware of Mason Verger and his Sardinian associates’ clumsy effort to ensnare Hannibal. She has no doubt Hannibal gave Verger all the rope he needed to hang himself, unless Hannibal reserved that pleasure for himself. Hannibal may still be having his fun. If Verger is successful, however unlikely that is, she is sure she will hear about it.

She has been musing over how Graham fits into all this. Verger wants both of them. And Hannibal has likely used the opportunity to play warrior with Graham, a convenient alliance intended to vanquish a common enemy. But Graham is unpredictable. His compassion and his conscience make him unpredictable. She thinks of Hannibal’s appeal to her in Boucher’s *Leda and the Swan*. For all his overtures, Hannibal is not certain which way Graham will turn and Du Maurier is his insurance policy. He even sent the hapless Lounds, entrusting the clever pawn to her. He no doubt expects Du Maurier to provide a distraction, more misdirection.

If you would be a swan, then let me see the swan, know the swan. My bed has room for only one other, Bedelia.

Du Maurier thinks Hannibal means for that distraction to translate into a tableau. His precious Graham had been coaxed into making one, why not she? Du Maurier shrugs her shoulders, cracks her neck. Graham's tableau in Baltimore may not be the only tableau, either. After dessert with the two of them at Hannibal's villa, Du Maurier thinks anything possible. Whatever is going on between him and Graham, and whenever it rekindled matters little at this point. Dear Doctor Clayton is an uninvited guest at Hannibal's table. However that drama plays out, Du Maurier is certain she will be reading about it by the time her plane leaves Zurich for Provence.

Hannibal's ego must have swelled to epic proportions to think Du Maurier would submit to this ridiculous *competition* with Graham. The very idea is ludicrous. Graham is so confused and compromised he likely was flattered when he woke up to find himself the centerpiece in Hannibal's tableau of Classical eroticism.

She does have to admire Hannibal's resourcefulness and ingenuity. The double tableau was darkly beautiful given Hannibal's usual predilections. It is also abundantly obvious he has allowed his obsession with Graham to get the better of him. All the better for her.

There are, however, many layers to Hannibal's universe. Du Maurier is aware that she does not supply merely one role within it although the role of the vindictive and jealous Hera would seem the obvious choice. Hannibal's thinking can be elusive and labyrinth-like, but Du Maurier is more than acquainted with the subconscious manifestations of that brilliant mind. On some level, Hannibal is aware of his weakness for Graham and has unconsciously reached out to Du Maurier. Which also means Hannibal still trusts her to a degree. Du Maurier reminds herself that their relationship has always been measured in degrees of this or that. That is why it has lasted for so long.

That is why Hannibal will not see the train has left him at the station until it is too late.

She drains her glass and pours another watching the blood red liquid splash into the crystal. She moves from the counter to take a seat in the living room. Time to call Banque Suisse and put her plan into motion. After all, she will be touching down on Kloten Airport's runway sometime tomorrow. From there it is a short taxi ride to downtown Zurich. Du Maurier's fingernails click against the crystal as she considers possible gifts for Levin, her contact at Banque Suisse who has been unfailingly helpful.

Du Maurier's diminutive feet sink into the plush carpet a little unsteadily and as she lurches forward to correct for the near slip she splashes several huge drops of wine from her glass. She stares at the dark circular stains sinking into the fibers and giggles softly. This time tomorrow this carpet, this life will not matter in the slightest. She rolls her eyes and continues to the sofa and coffee table where she picks up the remote, selects a classical music channel. A Schubert piece is playing. She recognizes the winsome strains of his *Death and the Maiden* violin concerto. She adjusts the volume so her conversation is not drowned in melancholia and picks up her phone.

After the usual preliminaries, she punches in Levin's extension and waits. She is surprised when a female voice picks up.

"*Oui, je peux vous aider*?"

The speaker is not French, the articulation too crisp, the accent too diluted. Du Maurer receives the impression German or Russian is a more comfortable fit. Du Maurier explains who she is, in flawless French of course, and the speaker, clearly a young woman Du Maurier decides after a few exchanges, switches to English for her.

“And your name, please?” Du Maurier asks politely.

“Tatiana.” The girl says. “I can help you with your account.”

“May I inquire what happened to Levin?”

“I have been assigned to handle his accounts…temporarily.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question, does it?” Du Maurier feels her neck becoming stiff and takes another sip of wine.

“I can see here that Levin has been handling your account for a long time…”

Du Maurier senses the hesitation in the girl’s voice, decides to press her just a little.

“We have established a certain rapport, yes. Did something happen to him that might impact on the account?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. At least I don’t think so since your account seems to be in order...”

Again, Du Maurier feels alarm sneak up her neck. “Perhaps you could elaborate for my peace of mind.”

Du Maurier listens to a breathy sigh as Tatiana contemplates what to say next. Du Maurier is aware their conversations are likely recorded for security purposes; however, unless Tatiana gave reason for her calls to be reviewed, a random sampling of this conversation is highly unlikely.

Tatiana apparently is thinking along the same lines. When she speaks, her voice is quiet.

“Levin is out on administrative leave for an indefinite period. I do not know why. As I said, I was reassigned here two days ago and have been given his accounts to manage.”

As they have been talking Du Maurier has become convinced she has talked to this Tatiana before, but the name does not register. “Have you and I spoke before? You sound familiar. Perhaps while checking an account balance for me or confirmation of a transfer?”

“I don’t believe so. I usually open new accounts.”

“Well, I hope all works out for Levin.”

“Me, too. What can I help you with today, Ms. DeWitt?”

“I’m afraid I have unpleasant news. My significant other, Monsieur Labrenz has passed away and I will be transferring the entire account in light of current developments arising from his…untimely death.”

“Oh…how awful for you. I am so sorry for your loss. Of course…will you be coming to Zurich with documentation soon?”

"Yes, but I was wondering if I could expedite the process by forwarding copies of the relevant documents ahead of time."

"Certainly. I can provide you with an encryption code you can use to send scanned copies though our file sharing server to protect your anonymity and to secure the documents."

Du Maurier smiles. "That is wonderful news."

"I will need you to re-verify both of your codes to begin the process. Then, I will supply you with the encryption code and you can send the documents at your leisure."

Du Maurier feels relief slink into every limb. "You will be the main contact on this transaction?"

"I will be the only associate here handling your account. All of your transactions are similarly encrypted for security."

"Excellent. What do you need from me?"

"Besides the official death certificate from the medical examiner there are only a few other documents. You do understand that when you arrive here, you will need to produce the originals."

"Understood. "

"Then, we are all set. May I have the bank codes please? His first."

"Of course."

Du Maurier rattles off Hannibal's bank code and then hers. She waits while Tatiana verifies the information.

"Ms. DeWitt?"

"Yes…?"

"Codes verified. I have the encryption code ready for you."

Du Maurier relaxes into the ample cushions while she writes down the secured number she is to call to access the code. She clicks the remote, switching tv channels. Her finger pauses as images of a local fire, a huge one, flicker on the screen. She turns up the sound and realizes the abandoned slaughter house ablaze on her tv belongs to the Paolini. It is the location of one of Hannibal's tableaux. Or Graham's.

Crawford must be terribly busy at the moment.

She leaves the news channel where it is as she listens to Tatiana's instructions. She thinks it a tedious process, but once done she can focus on the remaining items of her departure check list. Soon she is saying goodbye and hanging up.

She looks over her glass at the news as she listens to the report. The report is largely presumptive, no official cause or statements have been issued. The reporter does comment on the FBI presence at the scene, insinuating something sinister. Du Maurier thinks the reporter has no idea how accurate she is.

It would seem Du Maurier has plenty of time and there is no need to change her timetable. Crawford will call eventually and hopefully he will have sufficiently substantiated her story to his satisfaction to provide her with the agreed upon FBI escort into safe custody. She will agree to meet Crawford or his detail at her vacant apartment in Florence or she will agree to meet him at FBI headquarters. It doesn't matter. The call merely provides misdirection.

Crawford does not know her alias or where she lives or he would already have come. He remains in the dark about Lounds if anyone has even noticed or cares that she is missing.

Protective custody is the preferred exit strategy. Her story will have traction with Crawford and when she does not show, Crawford will assume initially she was intercepted. Crawford will be disappointed he never finds her body. Once Crawford has Hannibal, dead or alive, he won't give Du Maurier a second thought. Hannibal won't give her up. He will plot his revenge from behind his cell, his pride will demand he kill her himself. If ever gets out, and if he ever finds her.

Unpredictable as usual, Graham poses a bit of a snag, but his credibility will be gone. His complicity in Hannibal's macabre circus will sink him or, when Hannibal kills Clayton, and Du Maurier is certain that he will, Graham will be in handcuffs for killing Hannibal or Hannibal will have killed him.

Du Maurier has thought Crawford obtuse at times, but thinks perhaps a little of Hannibal has rubbed off on him. Crawford is aware of the living arrangements between Clayton and Graham. He has to be aware of their professional and unprofessional relationship. No one could be so obtuse as to miss that. Crawford may not know of Du Maurier's association with Clayton but he must be aware that Hannibal would have discovered Graham's association with him by now. Clayton bears more than a passing resemblance to Graham and rather than protect him, Crawford used him as a decoy. If anyone should be in protective custody it is Clayton, but Crawford hasn't placed him in custody. And he won't. Crawford will use any means to catch Hannibal and will live with the collateral damage.

And there is always damage.

If Crawford remains unconvinced, nothing changes except Crawford's perception of her. She can live with that. Either way, Du Maurier will be grabbing her pre-packed suitcase and essentials in Siena before the night is over. She can purchase plane tickets from Peratola in Florence or Da Vinci in Rome. She can buy a ticket from anywhere in Italy. By sending Lounds, Hannibal has practically handed her the tickets.

As for Doctor Francesca Dumont, her practice is about to close.

Du Maurier curls up on the couch with her wine. There are too many possibilities to account for and the brilliance of her exit strategy is that any outcome is acceptable. No matter what happens, whatever bloodbath is left in the wake of Hannibal's swan song, she has both bank codes and will be long gone.

The soft curls press against his cheek and Hannibal watches Will stir to consciousness again, or whatever state Will was in before his imagination hijacked his mind. Not that Hannibal is complaining. The sex between them might have actually been enhanced. He checks the stylish black Burberry watch amazingly still attached to his wrist after the rampage at the slaughter house. And the ravaging here.

Daniel should be pulling up to the intersection any time now, should already be here, with the much needed medical supplies. Will reclines beside him, stretched out along the ground, practically purring with a dreamy kind of contentment. This was not the case a couple minutes ago. Will's eyes had rolled into his head, the blackout had not lasted long but they were a very long series of seconds Hannibal does not want to repeat. He nudges at the curls, and stubbornly sniffs again for the slightly sweet aroma of encephalitis but detects none.

He presses a palm against the smooth brow then injured cheek and Will flinches at the touch. Hannibal decides the inflammation of the wound accounts for the fever he feels. Will tends to run a little hot and recent activity on this hot and humid Tuscan night has them both perspiring.

Will's fingers find his hand, shoves it away. Always the charmer his Will. Hannibal cards his fingers through the tangled mane before settling on shoulders instead.

"Will…you should have told me… help you?

Hannibal's voice descends like a fog. Like snow. Will wraps his arms around Hannibal's neck, hugs him close the smell of leaves, dirt, and moss fill his nostrils and the scent of spice and sandalwood is everywhere. He takes great gulps of the fragrant air and the irony that he finds comfort in the arms of his tormentor is not lost on him. Adam walks again in the garden. At least Will hopes so.

He opens his eyes and looks over Hannibal's shoulder. The relief is profound. He sees nothing but darkened fields, ancient fig trees, and a large moon overhead. He has no idea how long the semblance of sanity will remain, but he'll take it. His mind sifts through recent events as he breathes scattered snapshots he picks up and examines carefully; fully aware Hannibal is staring at him intently.

Hannibal is eager to talk as always, impatience shines in the dark luminous eyes that gaze at him. The expression takes a little longer to read because it is not an expression Will has seen before. At least, not on Hannibal's face. Will's heart stirs a little as he recognizes concern in the otherwise haughty face. A very distinct sort of concern, the way one looks at his child or his… Will decides this…thing they have is new, fragile, and he shouldn't attach labels to emotions just yet.

He rolls his head to the side, looks at Hannibal with what he hopes is a reassuring expression.

"I'm…okay. Just give me a minute."

"It is my professional opinion you just had a seizure of some kind." The voice is typically calm, conversational.

"And your unprofessional opinion?"

"That I…rocked your inferno to its foundations." Hannibal says, though he thinks inferno might be an inaccurate characterization considering Will's recent vocalizations.

"Humility is not your strong suit."

Will thinks neither are colloquialisms but preferable to one of his awful puns. Even those are possessed of a certain wicked charm. He releases Hannibal and lies down.

"Neither is precaution yours. You've been having blackouts as well as hallucinations."

It’s not a question. It feels like a reprimand, which Will supposes it is.

“Honeymoon over already?”

Hannibal actually laughs. So infuriating… “That…was therapy.”

Will frowns, bites at his lip. He’s got nothing for that one.

“Would you like…a honeymoon?” Hannibal asks sweetly.

Heat flushes up his neck and Will doesn’t know whether to laugh it off or punch him. He decides on neither. He rubs at his whiskers thinking Hannibal is probably not joking. And it is probably better to leave it alone. This is all so surreal. His mind still spins, thoughts shuffling around so much he feels dizzy all over again. Will cannot describe how…pleasant it is to talk with Hannibal unguarded. This feels like a dream and Will is not sure it isn’t. He rubs his face, winces as fingers catch on the cut.

“About the black outs. Daniel warned me this might happen.” He shrugs in the dirt, pulls himself up and turns to his side. “More like I would be lucky if it didn’t.” Will purses his lips, raises a brow. “You knew, didn’t you? Suspected?”

Hannibal sighs, slightly disappointed Will did not hurl a retort, but not surprised either. Transitions.

“The hallucinating, yes. Not especially difficult to notice when you have left the room. But the black outs…when were you planning on telling me, if ever?”

“There’s nothing I can do about them…” Will looks around for his infernal companion, the wolf, his winged Daniel. The grove is empty but for the two of them.

“You’re avoiding my question, Will. I need to know your state of mind before we take on Pazzi.”

“The possibility of having another one is slim. Unless we plan on fucking at Palazzo Vecchio.” Will grins.

Would you like to fuck at Palazzo Vecchio?

Hannibal narrows his eyes and Will thinks perhaps he is getting a little punchy. He needs a drink of water…

Hannibal stares at Will coolly. Will does enjoy his vulgarities and Hannibal is amused by Will’s colorful language from time to time, has even been aroused by it on occasion, just recently, but he finds Will’s favorite imprecation more than a little disingenuous at the moment. Hannibal wets his lips as he reconsiders. Will is not being dismissive; he’s being playful. Hannibal looks more closely into the pale blue eyes. He sees a flare of mischievousness, a willingness to revel in his new found freedom.

He presses his hand to the hip that faces him, squeezes the fleshy curve and the flare becomes even more mischievous. Unused to the departure from the usual reserve, it takes Hannibal a moment to process. This revealing is new, hiding and subverting is such a comfortable glove that to touch Will expecting to feel a suit and not is strange to say the least.

“We know what causes your dreams to intrude upon your waking world. We don’t know what causes your blackouts. What did Daniel say?” Hannibal says adopting his detached professional tone just for the pleasure of seeing Will…pout.

“I’m not asking for a second opinion.” Will snaps, eyes trailing from the hand perched on his ass along the arm and up to Hannibal’s face.

“Unsolicited though it is, indulge me. You’ve had blackouts before. You once drove…”

“I know what I did. You probably know better than I do.” Will slips his tongue between his teeth, lifts his brows and waits.

Hannibal clears his throat; a hint of a smile moves over his lips then melts. “Duration?”

“A few seconds like now,” Will sighs, “…sometimes for hours.”

“And you can’t recall what you were thinking about?”

“Not usually. I remember what I was thinking about up to a certain point and then, poof. I’m awake again.”

“Same location, or have you moved?”

“Sometimes I remain where I am. I have woken up…someplace else. Nearby…I didn’t drive anywhere.”

“Because you didn’t have access to your own vehicle. This has been happening since you arrived, hasn’t it? Even before you moved. You lived in a palazzo not far from Boboli before moving in with Daniel. I saw the ruined building.”

“Luciano gave me up.”

“Without much prodding. I would not have found you except for my chance appointment.”

“Not really chance, was it.”

“Not Du Maurier’s intention I assure you. I think she found your association with Daniel by accident, a convergence of circumstances and, after what I suspect were several awkwardly debilitating moments of shock, decided to capitalize on it.”

“To what end?”

“We digress, time for that later. About the salient issue…”

Will sighs looks into the dark eyes still shining with the after-glow of intimacy. He thinks there are more salient issues than Hannibal cares to count. Amusement tugs at his lips arrested by the sharp twinge at his cheek. Hannibal is absolutely filthy, and as he glances at himself he decides he is equally as filthy. Both of them lying on the ground wearing coats of blood and dirt, he completely naked and Hannibal hasn’t even bothered to stuff his cock back in or zip up his trousers. He bites at his lip and shakes his head. They are, both of them, utterly insane. Insane or not, his blackouts do pose a legitimate concern.

“He considered sleep deprivation or that my mind was trying to heal itself and was switching off when over stimulated, or that my subconscious was trying to tell me things and I was blocking…”

Will pauses at the subtle creasing around the eyes and the indulgent pursing of lips. “What?”

“Did you check for encephalitis?” Hannibal asks casually.

Will gives Hannibal a hard look, glances aside. “No illness.” Will props himself up on his elbows, narrows his eyes and looks at Hannibal carefully. “What do you think?”

“I think you aren’t blocking anymore. This is progress. Daniel has proven himself a most capable psychiatrist. You should be quite pleased. I am.”

“Of course you are.” Will scoffs.

“So were you a moment ago. Amazing how functional you are even when…compromised. *Restricted though you be by your defective sense, this is still the only existence for you."*

“Sounds like a quote…”

“It is. Beethoven. From his diary. I’ve always found your affinity with his work particularly fascinating. A profound demonstration of your gift.”

“Our symphony. Another movement begins.”

“A very intimate movement. Intimacy is difficult for you…as are transitions. Easier to kill than to…love.” *Or forgive.*

“Fate knocks.” Will says quietly, already backing off.

“And we have struggled between despair and hope. You’ve emerged from your chrysalis, Will. You are beyond me.”

Will remembers Hannibal’s words to him in Hobbs’ kitchen.

If you followed the urges you kept down for so long, cultivated them as the inspirations they are, you would have become someone other than yourself.

I know who I am.

Will knows who he is. He is who he has always been. As he scratches the dirt allowing the rhythmic movement of his fingers to ground him he thinks in this moment he does feel as though he had existed in a cocoon. Urges and impulses curtailed and his senses dampened by drugs, his gift borrowed in the furtherance of a righteous cause he watched unravel. Jack’s justifications now sound so sanctimonious. Ironically, it is Purnell of all people who remained true to her ideals.

He catches Hannibal staring at him in the vacuum of blissful quiet. He lifts his head and assumes an attentive expression.

Hannibal takes Will’s face in his hands and looks deeply into the pale blue eyes that have looked into him more deeply than he has ever allowed. Hannibal knows he’s been forgiven, Will would not be here otherwise, but he wants, he needs the words to be spoken. He wants to hear them, to see each syllable break from the lips that twist him inside out. To be twisted some more, to wring the last of the aching from his chest.

“Will…That symphony we write, the ink will always be wet.”

“More transitions. But the melody is more harmonious now. Do you hear it?”

“With perfect clarity.”

The finely arched brows wrinkle as Will looks at him questioningly. Hannibal feels the touch of Will’s hand in his hair suddenly. Will nuzzles his throat, rests his head in the crook of his neck.

His gift has been offered and accepted. Still, the wound bleeds with disappointment and the having will not be complete until Will gives voice to his forgiveness. Though Will has offered his forgiveness first with fists and now with lips pressed to his neck, the bestowing of such a weighty thing requires more than hands or lips can offer. *Patience.* Nemesis may yet tender the compassionate pardon in the arms of reconciliation, notes flowing from ink.

Hannibal’s fingers trail again along the scar and regret burns in the wound that has just begun to heal. Regret that he had to hurt; had to mar the flesh he had loved. He clings to reason, repeats to himself the logic that had snapped like a trap around his mind to stay his anger and guide the knife that night. Will had not been ready then. Had he not cradled Will’s head in forgiveness with one hand and delivered his punishment with the other, they would not be here now. Abigail…had been a dear sacrifice, essentially a gamble with Fate, but Zeus did not fold to the sisters and had rolled the dice.

What happened had to happen. Will is here with him, and yet Hannibal finds he still needs to hear the words.

I forgive you, Will. Will you forgive me?

Will brushes the strands of dark brown hair from the wrinkled brow. He studies the face in front of him, though the jaw is slack the hooded eyes appear drawn and there is tightness in the creases about the mouth, a lingering recalcitrance that belies the otherwise serene visage. Will has his regrets. Guilt and shame hang like turbulent clouds billowing through his mind, moldy residue of things swept away that cling still to the broom. But Hannibal sweeps a much tidier mind and Will tries to imagine what is stuck in his broom.

Their pursuit of Pazzi is not the culprit. And neither is Du Maurier though she remains a thorn in his side.   Will thinks perhaps he is responsible for the slight furrowing of golden brows and the barely perceptible constriction of facial tendons. He senses there is something he has left undone. Something he has yet to atone for.

“Then, why does it feel like I’m asking for forgiveness?”

Stunned, but oddly pleased, Hannibal bends down, presses his lips against the scar and swallows his pride lest hubris rob him of his heart’s desire.

“It’s…not you asking, Will.”

Will considers the bowed head, the reluctance to look up at him, the lips poised at his stomach. He glances at the bandaged shoulder, the multiple stab wounds along the tensed back, and the scars along his forearms. He thinks of Boucher’s *Leda and the Swan* immediately followed by images of Hannibal’s reinterpretation. Associations too rapid to follow, Will focuses instead on recent strands, grabs one and holds it tight.

I came for you, Will. I took that bullet for you. Yes, I think you could acknowledge that.

Hannibal is prideful. He is arrogant. He accepts any and all consequences for his actions. He is manipulative, uncompromisingly ruthless in pursuit of what he wants and capable of unspeakable cruelty. He is also capable of regret. But regret is not the same as contrition. In his own way, Hannibal has committed the sacrilege of atonement. For Will.

You were not the only one anticipating regret that night.

“I couldn’t tell.” Will says mildly, carefully, “How…am I supposed to…ever tell?”

Hannibal hears the melody falter again and he listens closely to the inflection of the words and understanding blooms. Will brushes at his lips with his fingers, an endearing habit he has when distressed. His tone is not accusing, rather it is resigned and somewhat sad. Separation is impossible for him now and with every breath he takes Hannibal knows he struggles with the acceptance of his fate. Their fate.

This is the one chord, the one note that Will strikes over and over. The most difficult notes of a transition are the last and the first. And, Hannibal thinks, this singular note is the reason the words he wants to hear do not pass Will’s lips.

Hannibal idly caresses the smooth skin below Will’s navel, eyes following his thumb as he traces the swirls of soft black hair downward admiring the beautiful form seemingly sculpted by God himself. His Adam. He chooses his words judiciously, tenderly as though slicing each one with a scalpel.

“You won’t. When your mind has re-acclimated from the stress of your present emotional state, as you relax into a less combative mindset with me, you may learn to differentiate. But, you will never know with any certainty.”

“How can either of us know if what I feel is me…or you?”

“You’ll never *know*, Will. I’ll never know.”

“How can you…tolerate not knowing?”

“That’s the beauty of it.”

“The horror of it.”

“A matter of perception as always. Michelangelo did not impose a design upon the marble; he released it.”

“With a chisel.”

“The chisel was merely the tool of his desire.”

Will chews on his lip as he thinks. The biting is preferable to the throbbing. He needs some ice. He needs some clarity. Hannibal is not telling him anything he does not already know, but he has been unapologetically truthful. No sins of omission committed now. Will thinks of their conversation over dinner with Daniel. Hannibal had spoken of redemption in regard to Will’s thinly veiled allusions to self-sacrifice but there is often embedded meaning when Hannibal speaks.

Redemption requires two entities. One cannot redeem himself.

The act of communion is an acknowledgment of that forgiveness.

And a promise to go and sin no more.

It is with a twinge of sadness so sharp it cuts that he remembers talking with Daniel about his very thing. Daniel had known before he did.

You have already forgiven him, Will.

Have I?

Yes. If embracing all that you have become despite being aware of the source, the influence and the conditioning, and the…sacrifices - then your participation signals forgiveness; if not in word, then deed.

Forgiveness is not the same as acceptance, Daniel. You've helped me understand that.

No, but acceptance is close. Closer than when we started your therapy. Still twisting in your inferno?

Still twisting. Still hallucinating.

The forgiveness isn't complete until you confess it. Your lips to God's ear.

"Hannibal…"

"Yes, Will?" Hannibal lifts his head though his hand lingers, circling Will's stomach.

"God made the clay."

"Acclimating already."

Will rolls his eyes impatiently, strokes a finger along his cheek as Hannibal has done so many times to him. Will settles on a verse he thinks will provide each of them with some semblance of closure they can live with. For the time being..

"*I shall fly and thou pursue: night at morn the flight renew."*

"Throughout all eternity…" Hannibal dares to pause.

"I forgive you…" Will exhales softly, turning his head to draw his lips across the bristly cheek, "*And you…forgive me."*

Hannibal curls his fingers against the scarred flesh, nudges his nose deeply into the damp curls inhaling all that Will is. Paradise is fleeting however and Hannibal's ears prick with the distinct hum of a car engine as it idles a short distance away. Will stirs beside him hearing it, too.

"Will…"

A beam of headlights flashes down the road at the intersection cutting through the evening haze of humidity and insects. Will shakes his head forcing his mind to shift gears that want to stay stuck where they are. Daniel. Where are his clothes?

“Our ride is here.” Hannibal says tearing his lips away.

“About that honest conversation…” Will says as Hannibal slips from his fingers.

“I think we just had it. Don’t you?” Hannibal is already standing up, eyes on the intersection.

“Oh no. You will have to explain your *arrangement* with the Paolini and Margot at some point.”

“I am pleased about our impending fatherhood. You should put on your pants. They’re over there.”

Will’s mouth falls open, his mind frozen. Hannibal points to the damaged fig tree by the Ducati and Will blinks a couple times trying to focus as Hannibal zips up his fly.

The headlights flash again and Will remembers Daniel is waiting for him to call. He pushes off the ground and stumbles over to the tree. He quickly locates his pants, almost leaves the boxers but thinks he shouldn’t leave any more evidence than he already has. He is still pulling up his trousers as he fumbles for his phone in the pockets. The fatherhood remark rankles but it can wait. There are other more immediate concerns that need to be addressed.

“Do you see my belt?” Hannibal asks looking around.

Will almost starts to rummage through the twigs and grass in the moonlight and stops. He takes a breath and a moment to shift from autopilot to manual.

“Fu…forget the belt. What is going on with Du Maurier? And Lounds…”

“Trust blooms slowly, one rose at a time.”

“I don’t smell roses. I smell fertilizer.”

Hannibal picks up his phone from the ground, brushes it off against his trousers. “As long as you’re sniffing…I still have the information the Paolini twins found on me. I would like to give it to you. See where your imagination takes you with that.”

Will’s jaw drops again and he quickly shuts it. Hannibal is just full of surprises this evening.

“Speaking of trust. How do you intend to deal with our dear doctor?” Hannibal asks smoothly.

“What do you mean, deal with him?” Will’s mental finger hovers over the alarm button.

Hannibal nods his head toward the intersection. “You won’t be keeping any secrets from him. It’ll take him no time at all to know you’ve been a naughty boy.”

Will huffs, yanks up his zipper and hits Daniel’s number on speed dial before his blood pressure becomes critical from waiting. He shakes his head as the call goes through. Daniel’s special empathy is probably not as quick as Hannibal’s mouth. This is Hannibal. Zero to One Eighty in a heartbeat.

Daniel picks up immediately. “Will?”

“Yeah. Sorry for the delay. Can you see the road if you kill the lights?”

"Yeah. I think so."

"Take a right, go slow about fifty yards and I'm going to wave the phone, guide you in."

"Okay."

Will watches as the headlights go out and the Mercedes begins to roll down the narrow road. He starts for the road and sees Hannibal is already there waving his phone. Will sighs and quickens his pace to catch up so Daniel isn't meeting Hannibal alone.

"Check that." Will says into the phone. "Hannibal is already there."

"Oh. That's him with the phone?"

"Afraid so. Can you see okay?"

"Well enough. Can he hear you?"

"Not at the moment."

"Jack Crawford has called several times. I haven't picked up but I will have to eventually."

"Jack…is a secondary concern at the moment. Look, Daniel…If you want to drop off the stuff and take off, I wouldn't blame you. In fact, that is exactly what you should do."

The anticipation of regret runs deep with Daniel and Will would rather give him an out before Hannibal has the chance to invite him along for the ride to the *Palazzo Vecchio*. He knows before Daniel even answers that he isn't going to take it.

"I told you…in for a penny in for a pound."

"This is going to blow up, Daniel. I can't protect you. I hate that you're involved as much as you are."

"Let me decide after you tell me what is going on. I can see you now…"

"Take it slow. There's nothing big in the way, but it's not flat."

"Got it."

Will joins Hannibal at the edge of the asphalt as he waves Daniel in before clicking off his phone. Hannibal turns away from the approaching vehicle to glance at Will.

"Glad tidings from brave Hector?"

"Behave." Will says.

Together they move backward one step at time, Hannibal holding up the phone while Will shadows him a few feet away.

Daniel holds the phone to his ear, realizes Will has hung up and tosses it on the seat. He is sweating like mad as he concentrates on guiding the car off road following the fluorescent beam from Hannibal's phone. The car dips and lurches, twigs crack, but the tires roll without incident and

Daniel sighs with relief when the little light gleaming through his windshield goes out. He shifts to park and pulls up the emergency brake. The relief is short lived.

He nearly jumps out of his skin as Hannibal taps the glass. Daniel opens the door and Hannibal pokes his head in. He is smeared with dirt and…blood from matted hair to filthy toes. Daniel's eyes quickly catalog the bandages and wounds as Hannibal holds the door open.

"Hello, Daniel. Lovely night, isn't it?"

"Hannibal…" Daniel manages despite the knot that has appeared in his throat. "Where's Will?"

"Other side." Will's muffled voice floats through the passenger side window.

"Pop the trunk." Hannibal says. "No trouble getting here?"

"Not much. They set up a road block already. Had to go a different way." Daniel says, releasing the trunk. "The trunk has a light."

"Yes. We'll need a little light."

Daniel climbs out of the car slowly giving himself time to acclimate and observe. Emotions tumble through him like an avalanche and Daniel braces himself. He can't insulate himself from Will, nor does he want to and he prefers to know as much about Hannibal as possible. He's been preparing for this encounter fully aware this may be the last time he sees Will.

His heart still lurches in his chest as he rounds the back of the Mercedes. Will stands beside Hannibal, chin up and waiting. A hesitant but genuine smile spreads across his face in greeting. Daniel's mouth falls open before he can help it. Will looks a mess.

"That bad, huh?" Will says.

Hannibal glances up from the trunk. Ignoring Hannibal, Daniel walks up to Will and throws his arms around his shoulders and feeling no resistance from him, hugs him close. Will's hands find his waist and Daniel nuzzles his neck. He can't resist dropping a kiss.

Will looks into Hannibal's eyes as he cradles Daniel's head and returns the kiss. Hannibal merely lifts a brow and returns to his perusal of the items stuffed into the Mercedes' generous trunk. Will cringes inside, the awkwardness nearly unbearable.

"You smell like dirt." Daniel says, detecting much more than dirt wafting from Will's body.

"Nice to see you, too." Will says stepping back. "You smell…good. Did you bring some of that with you?"

"No, just soap."

Daniel looks over at Hannibal still taking inventory in the trunk. He moves with his usual elegance despite his injuries and Daniel senses emotions percolating beneath the suave veneer Hannibal maintains. He feels excitement and a kind of contentment from Hannibal at odds with the bandages and injuries. The puzzlement ceases as Daniel finds a label for what he feels from Hannibal. Hannibal is floating in gloat. And beneath the gloating is the unmistakable prideful possessiveness he has felt before with Hannibal.

Daniel has no label for what he feels from Will. He just knows Will feels different to him. Daniel tells himself this should come as no surprise, but expectations do not set every nerve in his body to vibrating. He feels the sting of betrayal, the ache of disappointment. Jealousy tears at him and yet compassion swells in his heart, too. The bloom of love he feels for Will is not crushed, nor does it wilt. He has never met anyone who rips him apart as Will does.

And for this, he finds compassion for Hannibal, as well. He decides not to let Will off the hook. He thinks Will can unburden himself of any guilt he might feel with a confidential confession.

“And shampoo.” Daniel adds looking hard at Will. “Looks like you’ll need it.”

Will doesn’t move. The unease is palpable. He meets Daniel’s wounded gaze unapologetically, and the pale blue eyes that have always spoken volumes speak to him now. As Daniel gazes into that sea he no longer feels leaden but buoyant, the terrible weight he always feels from Will is absent. He glances at Hannibal and back to Will.

Will picked up his armor and let his demon out. He shared it with Hannibal and has found his redemption.

He feels Will’s finger brush along his wrist, a small gesture but even the subtlest of tokens such as this from Will are laden with emotion.

But, Daniel needs context. He cannot attribute what he sees or feels to actions or events. It would be wonderful, but neither can he read Will’s thoughts. He still doesn’t know what transpired at the slaughter house. He has no idea what either of them plans on doing next.

He has no idea what has transpired between them in the interim, either, but he is beginning to. They must have had a hell of time at the slaughter house by the look of them. Both of them have taken some pretty hard knocks in their battle and Daniel can only wonder what was forged or rekindled in the aftermath. It is abundantly clear that Achilles is pleased with his Patroclus. Patroclus’ feelings regarding Achilles remain a little mystifying. The touchy subject of who is wearing, stealing, borrowing who’s armor nags at him and Daniel thinks now would not be a good time to bring it up.

He tries to get a bead on Will’s state of mind. He wants to ask about his inferno, his hallucinations. He wonders if Will has lost time or blacked out. His personal safety hinges on Will and though Daniel does not enjoy thinking about it, the fact remains. Will has not put up any shields or locked himself up and for that, Daniel is grateful. Will has every right to his privacy, as much as he can manage, but his willingness to remain open and accessible to him means a great deal. Will’s fingers still cling to his wrist and Daniel decides to trust in the bond they have.

Daniel looks more closely at Will’s face, winces as he examines the cut that runs along the side from temple to cheek bone. The jaw and lips are cut and bruised, swollen a bit on one side and he’s covered with welts and bruises everywhere else that Daniel can see. Will’s neck looks especially raw and Daniel recognizes the shape of the bruises about his throat. Someone tried to strangle him. It is when his eyes alight on Will’s scar that Daniel feels the knot return to his throat and another falls like a stone into the pit of his stomach.

He no longer feels the familiar twinge across his stomach that Will’s presence usually causes. He’s not sure what that means, but his eyes begin to sting and he draws a tremulous breath. He looks into Will’s eyes, fingers absently tracing over the front of his shirt.

Will's eyes track Daniel's fingers, knows intuitively something is wrong, that something is bothering Daniel. He considers that Daniel has a lot of things to be bothered about. He shakes his head and glances at Hannibal but grasps Daniel's shoulder to offer a reassuring squeeze.

Daniel nods accepting the gesture understanding they are unable to speak freely at the moment. He'll have to wait for a private moment if they can manage it. The memory of their dinner hangs like a specter over his mind and Daniel thinks the remorse he feels from Will is perhaps due to this untenable position he is in. Will is between a rock and hard place, just like he was at dinner. Daniel gets the sense that the two of them have unfinished business, likely something to do with Mason Verger, or Pazzi. Maybe Jack Crawford.

"Hannibal." Daniel pauses, still unnerved at using his given name, "I should have a look at you."

"Will first." Hannibal says not even bothering to look up from his inventory.

"Okay." Daniel has no problem with that, though he finds Hannibal's tone peculiarly protective and he decides he doesn't like it. "I brought a cooler. I take it you're both dehydrated."

"So you did. Here, Will." Hannibal says pressing a wet plastic bottle into Will's outstretched hand. "And sandwiches. Most thoughtful. We've lost a lot of fluids today, built up an appetite, too."

Daniel flinches at the mention of appetites. He can do without the particulars. He watches Hannibal crack open a bottle and guzzle down the water, the penetrating gaze bores into him as Hannibal drinks. He thinks each of them needs a couple bottles just for starters. He's surprised neither of them is staggering around in hypovolemic shock, especially Hannibal given the dehydration and the bleeding. Daniel had expected a wearied blanched appearance after talking to Will earlier, but both of them appear rather flushed.

He turns his attentions to Will who has found a perch beside Hannibal on the bumper. His nerves prickle again as he watches Will open his bottle of water. He notes also that Will does not wander far from Hannibal, hovers near as though a tether binds them quite unlike the predatory circling he had witnessed from them at his house.

He walks over and kneels down so his face is level with Will's. In the light from the trunk, Daniel can see a little better and decides Will looks a little strung out. He places a hand on Will's knee, squeezes and receives a tired smile. Will tilts his head back and begins to drink, rolls his eyes to Daniel. Daniel picks up his cue.

"Your cut isn't so bad. What did he cut you with?" Daniel says.

Will pauses from chugging down the water, "Scalpel."

Will resumes his chugging and polishes off the bottle. He can't remember being so thirsty that it feels like his body actually drops in temperature as the water tumbles down his throat. He taps Hannibal's arm before dropping it into the trunk. Wordlessly, Hannibal hands him another bottle. When he looks back at Daniel, Daniel is sucking on his lower lip, eyebrows eclipsed by dark curls.

Will responds to the silent inquiry by folding his arms across his chest. The green eyes flicker as Daniel leans forward and lays his finger aside the wound.

"Got you good here at the top, near the hairline but it's shallower further down. Lucky he didn't slice through the cheek bone. A few stitches will keep it from opening up."

Will ducks his head and nods at Hannibal. “He’s in worse shape than I am.”

“I can take a look now.” Daniel says to Hannibal’s back, “From what Will told me, your leg is going to need stitches.”

“You’re an MD, aren’t you, Daniel?” Hannibal says turning from the trunk.

“Yeah. Not a surgeon, but I did my time in an ER.”

“Good to know I’m in capable hands.”

Hannibal had allowed Will to dig out a bullet and stitch his shoulder but Daniel thinks the smile genuine enough. He glances at the bandaged leg, observes the large blood stain and the dirt.

“You’ve had that bandaged for a while now. Let’s take it off and see how much it bleeds before you get washed up.”

Hannibal takes out Daniel’s medical bag and hands it to him. He retrieves a couple towels and a large plastic garbage bag and hangs them over the side. “I see you brought my bags as requested. Did you look through them?”

“No.” Daniel says. He didn’t and he’s not sure why.

Hannibal considers the large green eyes looking up at him and decides the charming doctor is being truthful. “You brought clothes for Will?”

“In the blue knapsack. Shoes, too. Shit. I even brought toothbrushes and toothpaste.”

Will chuckles as he slides his tongue over his teeth. “Not a bad call. Dirty laundry bag?” Will nods at the plastic bag.

“Evidence bag.” Daniel says. “You fill it with evidence and I guess I’ll make it disappear.”

Daniel startles as Hannibal leans down to take a healthy whiff of his collar. His nose lingers along Daniel’s neck sending a shiver down his spine and flush of heat along his throat clear to his head. Memory pops and he thinks of standing in his office with Hannibal sniffing him as he had adjusted his tie and he feels alarm rising, the sense of being sampled is persistent.

“You do smell good.” Hannibal says, lifting eyes and chin to glance at Will who predictably glares at him.

Daniel twists away, looking back and forth between the two of them. He decides, after a quick meaningful glance from Will that Hannibal is fucking with him. Or Will. Probably both of them. He sighs and rubs his neck. He blinks and remembers he brought libations. Beer mostly. Will and Hannibal may not want any, but Daniel didn’t bring it for them.

“After you check me out, we’ll need to get cleaned up before further medical attention.” Hannibal continues, “There’s a stream nearby. How deep is it?”

“Used to be just a couple feet, over your head in some places. I haven’t been around here for a while, but I don’t think much has changed. You want to get washed up in the stream? I brought gallons of water.”

“More efficient and faster than a bird bath on the bumper of your car. How fast does it run?”

“Not fast. It's just past the trees. I could shine the headlights for a couple minutes so you don’t fall and break your neck.”

“Acceptable. Will?”

Will sighs, resigned to Hannibal’s logic though bathing in a stream in the dark does not seem particularly wise. He considers washing up there will be less awkward than washing up here with Daniel standing around. They have to look presentable if they are going into the city. They’ll have to smell presentable, too.

“Take care of Hannibal and I’ll check the perimeter for evidence.” Will says lifting the trash bag and offering another reassuring smile to Daniel.

“And my belt.” Hannibal turns to toss a sour look at Will. “Do you remember where you threw it?”

“Memory can be an unreliable thing.” Will says already drifting into the shadowy grove.

So infuriating… Hannibal takes stock of the pinched expression on Daniel’s face as he turns back around. Satisfied that Daniel is sufficiently up to speed on current events he unhooks his trousers.

“Ready when you are, doctor.”

Feeling like he is moving through a bad dream, Daniel removes the surgical scissors from his bag, gestures toward Hannibal’s leg. “We’ll just cut them off with the bandage. So how did you get stabbed there?”

“Allow me to regale you with tales of the fall of Troy.”

A few minutes later, Daniel has moved the Mercedes so the headlights can shine a path to the stream. He watches Will and Hannibal traipse quickly through the grass butt naked and climb down the embankment. Judging by the innuendo and the electric shivers he felt each time Will and Hannibal had glanced at each other by the car, he knows this is not the first time they have stripped down this evening.

Nemesis has forgiven Zeus. Jack Crawford and Rinaldo Pazzi are completely fucked.

Jack Crawford sits behind the wheel of his FBI issue Mercedes waiting for the *Polizia* officer holding the glow stick to wave him on. As efficient as the Italian police force is, Jack knows the road blocks will accomplish nothing except to inconvenience local traffic. Zeller sits beside him still scrolling through files and various websites and databases on his laptop. He has all sorts of things plugged into its ports and Jack is tempted to ask what they are to pass the time but just the thought of conversation almost causes him to yawn. He taps his fingers distractedly on the steering wheel. He called Du Maurier a little while ago and she has yet to return his call.

Jack stares at the dirt beneath his fingernails and thinks how much he would like to step into the luxurious shower back at his hotel. At last his phone chirps and the caller id comes up gold. Jack smiles, clears his throat. He can’t wait to hear Du Maurier drop her psycho-babble on him as she tries to wriggle her way out of this. Jack nods at Zee and puts her on speaker.

“Doctor Du Maurier. Thank you for returning my call.”

“Agent Crawford. I think we can shove pleasantries aside, don’t you?”

Jack thinks Du Maurier’s voice more wine coated than usual. He thinks Hannibal has that effect on most people. His mind clicks suddenly as he thinks Will’s current sobriety an anomaly. He hasn’t shared one tumbler of whiskey with him since he arrived in Florence. Clayton appears to like his booze, but Jack has not seen Will with a drink at all. Will was always rather passionate about his drinking. Another vice or crutch must have taken its place…

“I’ll get down to it, then.” Jack says, flicking a finger at Zee to pull up the files he wants.

“You found the account for Mariah W. Gillam?”

“Yes I did. The account is now closed. A substantial amount had been deposited within the last month and withdrawn…this morning.”

“Well, I think the implications of that would be obvious. Mr. Graham has arranged for his departure from Florence. With Hannibal’s assistance.”

“I would concur, except there has been a development.” Jack says savoring the tremulous throat clearing at the other end.

“A development.” Du Maurier manages, fingers curling around the stem of her glass.

“Another account. Opened the same day. The deposit is not as large as the other but whopper sized. I mean I could retire easily on it. That account is open and still accruing interest.”

“And what does that have to do with me, or the other account?”

“The name on the second account is Demuri…Baudelaire.”

Jack smiles as he grinds his back into the plush leather. He glances at Zee who is also smiling broadly as he nods at his laptop screen.

“Doctor…”

“I still don’t understand.” Du Maurier breathes. She doesn’t. Baudelaire is a famous French Poet. She remembers she read some of his work during her undergraduate years. Titles of poems unroll like gauze through her mind. She remembers his work had been considered scandalous at the time.

“Doctor Du Maurier, the name popped for a couple reasons. Are you certain you have no idea…”

“I assure you this is the first I am hearing about it. Please explain why it…popped.”

Jack shakes his head at the unfailing habit Du Maurier has of sounding polite and condescending at the same time. He wonders if she mimics Hannibal or he mimics her.

“Mariah W. Gillam is an anagram for Will Graham. Demuri Baudelaire is anagram for your name.”

Silence. Jack hears a hurried swallow and the smacking of lips.

“I see. And what else?”

“This is where it gets complicated. I should not disclose the details of the crime scenes, but in this instance I will share some of the evidence we found because the evidence points to you.”

“Go on.” Du Maurier sets down the wine glass, taps the toe of her Prada pump against the coffee table.

“We found blonde hair at each crime scene. The tableaux at *Il Porcellino* and at the Paolini slaughter house. And the one at Boboli, the tableau you said you had no knowledge of. Eagle feathers from one of your hats were found at Boboli, too.”

“And you know the feathers and the hair are mine? How?”

“I trust my forensic people. The DNA is incontrovertible. Of course, you are free to challenge it at trial.”

“Is there more, or is that all you have?” Du Maurier does not care how Crawford got hold of her DNA. The restaurant most likely. *C’est la vie. Que sera sera…*

“It was the name Baudelaire that caught our attention. You are familiar with the French poet?”

“Of course.”

“There were references to his work in one of the Paolini tableaux. A book of his poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal* was part of Will’s tableau. In fact, it was from clues in a particular verse that we located the key to get him out of his shackles.”

“Fascinating.” Du Maurier says sounding anything but fascinated. “Is that a collective we, or did Graham locate the key?”

“Will did.”

“Agent Crawford, you are entertaining the possibility I have been framed? Because that is exactly what Hannibal has done. And further, I would ask why he would frame me. What does he gain by doing so?”

There she goes… “I think Hannibal likes to play games. He framed Will, why not you? Seems to me that Hannibal is playing you and Will. Or perhaps, playing *with* you?”

“If you are looking for a ménage à trois, I think you will be disappointed.”

“Why do you think he framed you, if that is what he did?”

“Misdirection. As I’ve already told you, Hannibal can be caught up in his own self-congratulation. He does not coerce, he influences. That influence can take many forms. It can even take the form of manufactured evidence.”

“Like manufactured insight?” Jack returns.

“Something like that. Have you located Mr. Graham this evening?”

“No, I have not.”

“Hannibal is with him wherever he is. And while you chase me, they are walking right past the *Polizia*, Interpol, and the mighty FBI.”

“Perhaps.”

“What did you find in Impruneta?”

“Enough to confirm what you said, but plenty of mud to wade through.”

“You are referring to Hannibal’s preoccupation with Greek mythology?”

“And his preoccupation with Will. No drawings of you, though. I guess you dodged a bullet there.”

Du Maurier thinks Crawford’s remarks quite insincere and decidedly provocative. She ignores this, already finding him tiresome. She glances at her watch.

“Hannibal’s universe is very complicated.” Du Maurier says. “It has occurred to you that Achilles and Patroclus are an integral part of that universe.”

“Hard to miss that. And where do you fit in? I can see Will as Patroclus easily, but you?”

“I’m not aware of any such correlation, but that doesn’t mean Hannibal hasn’t made one.”

“Interesting. I figured you for a goddess.”

“Is that supposed to be flattery?”

“Hardly. But, Achilles and Patroclus are influenced by the gods. The gods take sides in the conflict. Perhaps you are one of those. On the side of the Greeks, of course.”

“That is rather fanciful thinking, Agent Crawford. I think Hannibal would be impressed. Achilles is a powerful half god and very appealing to Hannibal, but Achilles is at the mercy of the gods and that is inconsistent with his pathology. I doubt that I would be assigned a role of such power in his *Iliad*.

“He seems especially preoccupied with Boucher’s *Leda and the Swan*. Had a print of it in Impruneta and Baltimore. In the dining room. Any thoughts about that?”

“I never went to his home in Baltimore. But surely you can imagine the associations. The carnality of eating and being eaten?”

“He drew a version with Will as Leda.”

“Hannibal is not without a sense of humor, Agent Crawford. But, you did not call me about Hannibal’s artistic aspirations, or did you?”

Jack thinks her hand well played. She neither admitted or denied seeing Hannibal’s artwork directly and talked around everything in the nebulous way she has. Du Maurier is capable of speaking in code, of proffering insight through metaphors as she had with him and Will at Quantico. He finds it difficult to imagine such a malignant being in the role of psychiatrist. She is just like Hannibal. Perhaps worse. At least Hannibal displays some concept of morality, even if the morality is his own. Du Maurier is constructed of lies, a house of malicious little cards.

In this instance, Jack thinks he has never met anyone who says so little with so many words.

"Your best chance to clear your name and reputation is to submit to protective custody. I can get you immunity in exchange for your testimony to controvert whatever Hannibal's lawyers throw at us."

"And Graham?"

"And Will, too, if the evidence supports it."

"Full immunity?" Du Maurier rubs the oil from her fingers into the polished wood of the coffee table, watches her fingerprints sink into the sleek waxed finish.

Jack sighs as though he absolutely hates the idea. "Yes, full immunity. I wouldn't have found his villa, not so quickly, and I wouldn't have all the lovely evidence I found in his kitchen and basement."

"I doubt the kitchen and the basement contain the most damning evidence, but…if Hannibal is framing me, then it would be wise to let him believe that you have arrested me."

"Where are you? I can send a car to your home…"

"I'll provide you my address. It's an apartment along the Arno. Third floor."

Jack waits for the text, sends it to Zee. "You can see *Ponte Vecchio* from there, can't you?"

"Yes. One of my favorite places to browse and spend an afternoon. I believe it prudent to come in as soon as possible in light of the information you disclosed. I am, of course, happy to provide insight on any aspects of the tableaux or the…artists."

"I'll make the arrangements as soon as I hang up. Don't leave your apartment. If you are not there when my agents arrive, you forfeit the agreement. I'll thank you for your cooperation in advance. This voluntary gesture on your part goes a long way, Doctor."

"Understood. Ciao, Agent Crawford."

Du Mauier clicks off the phone and heaves a sigh of relief. There is an added bonus to leaving Florence. She will never have to talk to Jack Crawford again. Of course she will not be at the apartment overlooking the Arno. She has not been there since she signed the lease.

She takes a pair of scissors and pack of cigarettes from the top drawer in the kitchen and the Glock. The Glock is quickly shoved to the bottom of her Versace purse and set aside. She walks back to her bedroom and eases down on the bed curling shapely legs beneath her. She places a finger aside Lounds' throat, and counts off looking at her watch. It is important that Lounds remain alive during her departure. Unconscious, but alive.

Du Maurier looks down at the serene face, so pretty in repose. A shame the words from the mouth completely destroy the beauty, not unlike another acquaintance that comes to mind. Du Maurier turns Lounds onto her stomach, face down and taking up one handful of the ginger hair at a time begins to cut lengthy skeins from her scalp.

When she has finished clipping Lounds' hair she wraps the curls into bundles and ties them off. Lounds looks entirely different without the ginger tresses. Du Maurier passes her fingers along the stubble that remains and thinks by the time the FBI find her, she will be unrecognizable. Which is, of course, the idea. The unfortunate Doctor Francesca Dumont died in a tragic accident at the Fiore Winery.

Du Maurier pulls out a cigarette from the pack and lights it as well as the rest of the pack. She watches the cellophane crinkle and satisfied that the flames are adequate, she drops the pack to the carpet beneath the curtains. She takes another drag off the cigarette before tossing it onto the bed. She waits until the flames catch on the newspaper deliberately positioned next to Lounds and picks up the bag of ginger hair.

She walks briskly to the dining room and decides she has time to finish her glass of wine.

As she lifts her wine glass she thinks of the Boucher painting. She rolls the piquant vintage over her tongue and reflects on Crawford's suggestion. The observation was likely one of Crawford's transparent pricks, but it is possible he may have struck upon something, no matter unwittingly. She walks over to the bookcase and pulls out an edition of Homer's classic poem, hardbound, its pages thick to hold the weighty prose. She flips through the pages, skimming through book after book until she finds the passage that flutters in her memory.

Watching them, Zeus spoke to his sister-wife, Hera 'Once more, my ox-eyed queen, you get your way, spurring fleet-footed Achilles into action. Those long-haired Greeks might as well be your own offspring.' 'Dread son of Cronos', the ox-eyed queen replied, 'what can you mean? Even mere mortals, that lack my wisdom, will do what they can for a friend. How could I, the greatest of goddesses, doubly so as the eldest and the wife of the king of all the gods, how could I refrain, in my anger with these Trojans, from causing them all the trouble I can?'

Yes, Du Maurier thinks, Hera is to play her part, dole out distractions and mind the store so Achilles can continue to play in the garden with his Patroclus, Adam, whomever.

She walks the suitcase out to her car and glances around the rolling hills of the vineyards and orchards she leaves behind. Soon she is headed toward Siena where she will pick up her luggage, confirm arrangements in Zurich, and hand the real estate agent the keys to the residence in Siena. No one will remember the reclusive widow who never existed.

"Jack…" Zee looks up from his laptop, eyes squinting as they adjust to the dim light in the car.

"What, Zee."

"Price says they still haven't located whatever the Paolini twins found on Hannibal. They found Lucia's travel bag in the basement. Nothing but makeup, magazines, wallet, and so on. If he ever had it…"

"Oh he found it and destroyed it, or put it someplace we'll never find. But keep looking. He might have stashed it under a rug." Jack says dismissively holding out no hope whatsoever.

"Maybe a safety deposit box. More secure than leaving it at his villa. Must have been pretty important stuff."

"Will and Mason had copies of real estate deeds and newspaper articles from his home in Lithuania. Lots of info on its Soviet occupation. If the Paolini ever told Will what they were bringing with them, I doubt he'd reveal it. He hasn't yet."

"Did he say anything about it at all?"

"Nope."

"Uh, Jack…"

"What now?"

"We aren't going to HQ, are we?"

"We're not going to HQ because Du Maurier is not going to HQ. I doubt she is at any apartment overlooking the Arno. She is in Fiesole."

"At the winery. They're probably closed. What are you thinking, Jack?"

"You said the eagle feather is a match for what we already found. Found a hat of hers missing feathers at Hannibal's villa."

"Yeah."

"She gave up Hannibal. Hannibal knew she would after he found the GPS on her. He's pissed. He basically sent us Du Maurier's address, and likely her alias."

"And the receipt from Lounds?"

"I don't know. I called her hotel. I don't have her cell. No answer. Ms. Lounds might have tattled on her last crime."

"You think we'll find Lounds in…the fridge? At Du Maurier's place?" Zee says, voice climbing an octave.

"God, I hope not. Maybe it's just a heads up. Can you get on her site and chat with her, leave a message?"

"Sure. I'll do it now. If she's working, she'll see it right away."

Jack's phone chirps again and he grabs it out of the console. It's an FBI extension. Jack picks up wondering what madness waits at the other end.

"Crawford here."

"Agent Crawford? Hello. This is Agent Cummings. I'm at *Ospedale Le Scotte* in Siena and I have a rather troublesome situation here."

"And you're calling me because…"

"Because the situation is directly connected to your current case."

"Go on." Jack rubs at his eyes unable to imagine what a hospital in Siena has to do with Hannibal.

"You are working with a *Polizia* Captain by the name of Pazzi?"

“Yes.” Jack’s fingers tighten on the steering wheel.

“Well, his wife is here insisting that someone from your unit called her a couple hours ago and told her that her husband had been injured in the line of duty on some joint operation with you and she should drive here immediately.”

“Wait…Captain Pazzi isn’t there?”

“No. The hospital has no record of admitting him. She was told, by a Special Agent Jimmy Price that he was brought in under an assumed name and that she shouldn’t talk to anybody. It took a while for her to believe me. Now she’s getting hysterical.”

“Has she called her husband? I mean, Jesus…”

“She was told not to call. That whoever had injured him had stolen his phone and to let the FBI handle it.”

Jack’s jaw tightens. This has Hannibal written all over it. Of course she wouldn’t call her husband if FBI Special Agent Price told her not to. She believed her husband was in the OR or ICU. She didn’t care about his phone.

“And if he calls her?”

“Not to pick up, that…”

“That the FBI will handle it. Fuck!” Jack slams his hands on the steering wheel causing Zee to jump and grab the laptop before it tumbles off his lap.

Jack runs scenarios quickly through his mind and settles on the most obvious solution. It’s at Allegra Pazzi’s expense, but Jack can’t let her talk to her husband. Hannibal and likely Will are planning a party for Pazzi and without an invitation, the only way Jack is going to find the party and Hannibal, is if Pazzi attends. He won’t attend if his wife calls.

Hannibal obviously intends to lure Pazzi someplace, probably using his wife as the lure. Jack can’t quite see all the angles but his gut tells him that he is correct.

This is Signora Pazzi’s best chance to get her prison bound husband back alive. Jack does not think that the most likely outcome but that’s how he’ll explain to her when they find Pazzi strung up in a mythical allegory.

“You’re right. This is directly related to my current case. I’m ordering you to keep her there and do NOT let her call her husband. Under any circumstances.”

“What reason can I offer for that?”

“Use your imagination.”

“All right, Agent Crawford. May I ask why?”

“Better that you don’t but I’ll tell you this. Captain Pazzi is suspected of compromising my investigation. I need to find out what he is up to.”

“If he gets a call from his wife, he’ll know…what?”

“That whatever he is doing is no longer a secret.”

“Right. I never asked.”

“Good boy. Keep me in the loop.”

“What do I do with the wife?”

“Perhaps one of the doctors there could give her something to calm down. Calm down…a lot.”

“Gotcha. I’ll keep you posted.”

Jack thinks Agent Cummings is looking at a bump in his pay grade.

The Santa Croce district of Florence does not have the Quattrocento feel like the rest of the city. It is picturesque in its own way, and resembles Italy as it was during WWII. Consequently, Santa Croce is less a tourist attraction and Pazzi has always found that to be one of the more agreeable perks of living here. This is especially so at night Pazzi thinks as he locks his car in the parking garage. He glances around before he leaves the garage for signs of being tailed or surveilled. He sees none. He leaves the garage and ambles up the street towards the renovated apartment building where he resides.

He had been surprised to find that Doctor’s Clayton’s practice was not far from his home. He had checked out the offices of Ventresca and Associate one afternoon and had been impressed with the apparent success of the practice, and more impressed when he had learned that Clayton ran the location himself.

That is, of course, not currently the case. Doctor Clayton can pretty much kiss his career and his practice good bye by the time Crawford finishes with him. For reasons Pazzi cannot fathom, Clayton has thrown everything away for Graham. And for such a well-respected psychiatrist, he wasn’t able to help Graham at all. It seems to Pazzi he only made things worse for Graham.

He shrugs and drops his cigarette, crushes it beneath his shoe as he climbs the steps to his suite. Allegra doesn’t like smoke in their home. She gives him the eye every time she smacks his jacket when he comes home from his shift. He is looking forward to getting smacked tonight.

All of the arrangements for leaving Florence have been made. Pazzi had left the slaughter house and driven immediately to the closest lodgings, taken a shower and changed his clothes. He disposed of the smoke scented and soiled clothes. And he used one of the available public laptops in the hotel’s coffee shop to make hotel reservations in Rome.

He has already covered his ass with his superiors down at the precinct. Covered his ass with Interpol. And he has covered his ass using Detective D’Angelo. It is the lovely D’Angelo who is listed as the warm body taking security detail outside of Clayton’s house in Fiesole. He has no idea where she really is, but the paperwork will show she was there. She will scream that she was not. And who will believe the detective so smitten with Graham, and possibly Clayton, that she played wife with both of them at the Uffizi.

Tonight he will drive Allegra to Rome for a romantic evening. By tomorrow, this nightmare will be gone.

Pazzi grins as he shuffles through the mail Allegra keeps in one of her mama's old ceramic serving bowls on the bookcase by the door. He rifles through the usual bills and advertisements. He glances at a large envelope that looks like it contains a brochure, maybe a catalog of some kind from the Uffizi. He tosses them back in the bowl.

"Allegra…"

Odd, he thinks she has not already run out from the kitchen to greet him. The apartment is a little dark considering how late it is.

"Allegra?"

He wanders into the kitchen, flicks on the overhead light. The kitchen is, of course vacant. He notices with growing apprehension that dinner, or what was to be dinner, is spread all over the counter. It is not like Allegra to leave out chopped vegetables or opened jars of condiments. The stove is not on, but Pazzi thinks she didn't get that far before she was interrupted. Or taken.

He pulls out his phone and cannot believe Allegra's number rings, rings, and goes to voicemail.

His heart thuds in his chest with dread and his stomach contracts. The bile that rises is thick as slime, coating tongue and tonsils with acrid saliva. He swallows several times and tries to get his bearings.

No. NO. NO.

He thinks there is no possible way that Lecter or Graham got here before he did. He has not talked to Allegra all day. She could have been taken anytime…

He races back to the foyer and grabs the bowl from the top of the bookcase. There is no stamp. It was hand delivered. He can't open the envelope from the Uffizi fast enough. He forces himself to slow down. With trembling fingers he tears the thick fancy envelope open. It is some sort of ticket postcard to an exhibit. A lecture. *By invitation only* it reads.

Pazzi stares at the date. This is an expired ticket. The exhibit was eight years ago. Pazzi's heart nearly seizes as he reads over the text of the museum's announcement about the exhibit. It's a celebration of Medici opposition to Papal control of Florence with special emphasis on Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici and their rivalry with the Pazzi family and Pope Sixtus IV.

Lecter must have gone through the archives of the museum and pinched this invitation. Pazzi's mind spins. He can't imagine how or when he managed to get it. Lecter hasn't had access to the museum for days. Graham.

Pazzi shakes his head and rummages through his inside pocket for his cigarettes. He lights one up immediately barely able to hold it in his hand and offers a silent prayer to Allegra to forgive him for lighting up in the apartment. It does not matter when or how Lecter, or Graham, removed the invitation he holds.

He flips the heavy postcard over and feels tears well up. In elegantly bold script drawn in ink the message reads:

Joy is on the menu. Bon appetit.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 83

Hannibal quotes from Beethoven’s Tagebuch Diaries 1816. "Live alone in your art! Restricted though you be by your defective sense, this is still the only existence for you."

Will and Hannibal quote again from William Blake’s Broken Love.

Du Maurier reads from Homer’s Iliad, Book XVIII

Allegra is Italian for joy.

Whew! A lot to digest and hopefully enjoy. Coming up next, Jack arrives at the winery in Fiesole. Pazzi arrives at Palazzo Vecchio. Daniel and Will have some alone time. Will and Hannibal arrive at Palazzo Vecchio. (may not be in that order!)

Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

Hannibal, Will, and Daniel prepare for the rendezvous with Pazzi at Palazzo Vecchio, but they have to get out of the stream first. Jack arrives at Villa Fiore in Fiesole to discover the Firenze Fire Department is already there.

“The creature Hannibal…sorry, that’s what I call him.” Will says looking down at Hannibal.

“Understandable. He is…you. Continue.”

“He said, I said…” Will pauses, “whatever…a couple of things before the snakes swallowed each other. One was that I was still missing pieces…”

“What pieces?” Daniel says.

“That’s what I said. Hannibal, this...Hannibal..." Will points to Hannibal's head feeling vaguely foolish having to clarify which Hannibal he is referring to, "...brought up pieces, too."

“Perhaps Will is subconsciously consumed with his armor. Have you misplaced it already?” Hannibal asks smoothly, noting the scowl that paints itself across Daniel’s face.

“I don’t have it.” Daniel huffs.

“And the second thing...” Will’s voice cuts through the cold stare Daniel has leveled at Hannibal, “…was that I was incomplete.”

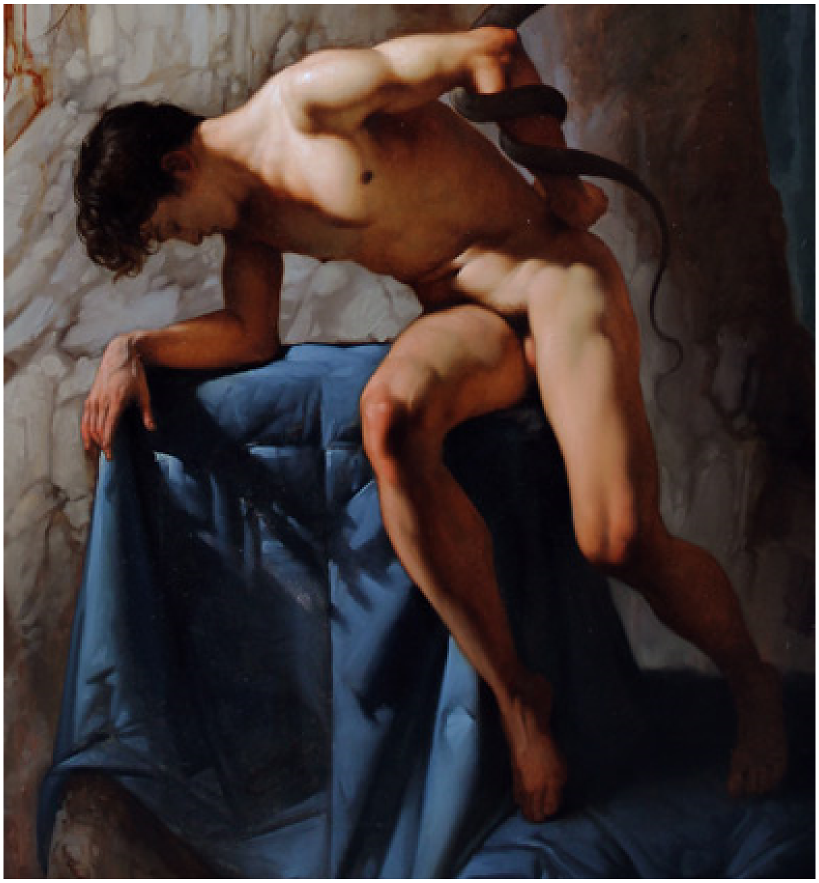
“That’s redundant.” Hannibal says.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 84

Hannibal, Will, and Daniel prepare for the rendezvous with Pazzi at Palazzo Vecchio, but they have to get out of the stream first. Jack arrives at Villa Fiore in Fiesole to discover the Firenze Fire Department is already there.



La morte della Sfinge, Roberto Ferri (cropped image)

O Beauty! Dost thou generate from Heaven or from Hell?

Within thy glance, so diabolic and divine.

Confusedly both wickedness and goodness dwell,

And hence one might compare thee unto sparkling wine.

From *Hymn to Beauty,* Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

The wide stream flowing beneath the cascade of the Mercedes' parking lights runs parallel with the Arno through the Sieve's Basin, a sub-basin that surrounds Florence. One of the longest rivers in Italy, the Arno originates in the Apennines, its headwaters in Monte Falterona some thirty miles away in Campigna National Park. Tuscany's lush fields of sunflowers, orchards, and vineyards depend on the tempestuous river, known to run dangerously low only to flood without notice. Tonight, the Arno is quiet; it rolls sedately toward the Ligurian Sea as its sister stream courses beneath the star filled Tuscan sky.

The Mercedes' lights slice across the embankment to the other side providing plenty of illumination, perhaps too much Daniel decides as he gazes into the stream below. He stands by the

Mercedes atop the embankment looking down. He takes a sip from the ice cold bottle of Menabrea, his second, as he watches Hannibal and Will through the haze of halogen bulbs. He looks for more going on between them than the simple act of bathing. He is too entrenched in their universe to presume mere mundanity prevails upon the unassuming stream.

However, the simple act does have his attention.

Neither Achilles nor Patroclus is wearing any armor now and Daniel cannot stifle the curiosity he tells himself is natural. He's already acknowledged the hurt that crawls over his skin like a gnarled vine, sprouting tiny leaves he has to constantly clip. The relief he had felt hearing Will's voice on the phone had been profound, but the ache of imminent separation had sprouted as well, the vine erupting in his heart constricting around his ribs. The countdown to Will's departure began to tick away and he had loaded up the trunk knowing every moment with Will would be a gift.

He sensed a similar ache in Will, felt it like another vine twisting with Will's other tangled emotions twining with his own each time he had touched Will by the car. He thinks perhaps it is not the Fates who guide him as much as his own reluctance to let Will go. Letting him go is difficult enough; letting him slip away with Hannibal is unbearably so. For this, Daniel thinks his special gift a curse. Were it not for his empathy, Daniel would not be assisting them to elude the authorities. He would certainly not be helping Will to leave with someone else.

But Hannibal is not merely someone else. He is Achilles. And Achilles has not taken kindly to Hector spearing his Patroclus, despite the seductive overtures. Daniel thinks the rescue from certain death at Du Maurier's quaint digs at Villa Fiore had been more an expression of Hannibal's enormous God complex and less an act of compassion. How could God resist raising Lazarus from the dead? If Hannibal had allowed him to die at Du Maurier's place, he would have lost an avenue of discovery. God had desired to know what the viper in his hoped for garden was up to before he could bring his Adam there.

So God had breathed life into Adam's unwitting surrogate, perhaps unable to allow even the shade of his beloved to expire before his eyes. But Adam is with him now; his precious Patroclus stands naked at his side. The only one concerned about armor seems to be the overdressed Hector. The cloak of apprehension he shrugged off in the car apparently followed him here and try as he might he can't seem to shrug it off again.

The shrugging was a little premature he reasons. He had not known about the proposed madness at the Palazzo Vecchio. Hannibal and Will have set aside their *Iliad* in exchange for Florentine history. Lorenzo the Great and his younger brother Guiliano, favored son of Florence will take their revenge on Francesco Pazzi for his part in their attempted assassination.

However, the Pazzi Conspiracy was partially successful. Daniel remembers Guiliano died from his wounds during the attack. Will is clearly not playing the role of Lorenzo and Daniel reasons that since Giuliano is alive and well in Hannibal's rewrite of history, perhaps his *Iliad* has undergone a similar revision. Pazzi can entertain no such hope.

After the erstwhile Medici brothers execute Pazzi they will cast him into a corresponding circle of hell, arranged in an especially gruesome *contrapasso* Daniel is certain both Hannibal and Will have given considerable thought.

Pazzi knows what Hannibal and Will are capable of first hand. Daniel had sensed the horror twisting behind the brown façade of cool at the crime scenes, had felt the revulsion that had sent Pazzi to light one cigarette after another as he had circled Lucia and Luciano's tableaux. Pazzi must be insanely greedy or simply insane to meet them there. Hannibal seems confident Pazzi believes they have his wife. Will is at least as committed as Hannibal. If more proof of his greed were required, which it is not, Pazzi will have demonstrated the depths of his deadly sin when he shows without backup. Daniel cannot imagine taking on Hannibal and Will alone in the hopes of keeping the illicit reward. Daniel thinks it more likely Pazzi intends to trade the reward for his wife. Unfortunate for Pazzi the devil cannot be bought.

He leans on the hood of the Mercedes unassumingly sipping his beer watching the pair as they scrub grime and blood from shiny bodies glistening in the glare from the headlights. Will can hardly begrudge Daniel his curiosity and he has the distinct impression Hannibal won't. Supreme narcissist that Hannibal is, Daniel is convinced Hannibal would be disappointed, if not offended if Daniel did not check him out. It is impossible to further inflate his ego anyway.

Will glances up, acknowledges Daniel with a tilt of his head and continues rubbing the soapy cloth along his arms. He knows the reason for the perturbed scowl on Daniel's face and understands his need to hold his ground however pointless. He is wounded, they both are, and he will pick at this particular wound until he accepts it is not going to go away. Transitions are difficult, even when one has been given the score. Will knows.

Hannibal halts his scrubbing, lifts his head and turning from Will, actually stands erect permitting a full frontal view ignoring the long suffering sigh that ensues beside him. Daniel does not miss the arrogant tug of Hannibal's lips as he squeezes water from the facecloth he holds in front of the sculpted chest. Water dribbles down his torso and drips from the half hard cock that protrudes from the tangle of hair between the well-muscled thighs.

Arousal is immediate and obvious and as Daniel shifts his body to accommodate the sudden tightening of his boxers he is unable to attribute the rush of heat and the swell of his cock to his emotions or to Hannibal's with any surety. Daniel is having trouble attributing his emotions as it is; his empathy with Will as fluid as the stream flowing past them. Uncertainty hangs like a cloud, Daniel is unsure if he or Will is the source of the happiness bouncing between Hannibal's legs and decides it doesn't matter. Either or both of them could be the culprit. Hannibal is obviously pleased to be right where he is, smack dab between them ever pulling the strings, always lighting fires. He pulls the damper over the flames before they climb any higher.

Hannibal continues to gaze up at him from the stream his expression pensive, the dark eyes appraising him move slowly over his body and Daniel wonders what thoughts fill Hannibal's mind at the moment. Will had said Hannibal's mind was always traveling along multiple trains of thought at any given time. Daniel thinks Hannibal might reduce the number of rails in his head if he could refrain from fucking with everything and everyone around him. Daniel reminds himself Hannibal's mind does not travel the rails everyone else's mind does. Fucking with everything is entertainment, whimsy on a divine and epic scale.

Daniel sucks on his beer thoughtfully. God-like Achilles is definitely god like. Hannibal is well into his prime yet the physique on the man is enviable. And, while keeping a semi-hard on in the cold water elicits a raise of Daniel's brow, the strength suggested by the musculature is impressive and Daniel has no doubt Hannibal is about as stoppable as a locomotive once he gets going. Daniel holds the prideful gaze for a moment and salutes Hannibal with his bottle of beer. Achilles basks in the adulation; a smug smile carves itself across the polished face before Will interrupts nudging a solid bicep with the shampoo. Hannibal relents and takes the bottle from Will's hands turning away to toss his washcloth onto a nearby rock.

Daniel shifts his gaze to Will who presses his lips together and shakes his head. Daniel understands the gesture. If he continues to poke the lion he is going to get bit, at least nipped. He picks at the label on the wet bottle, thoughts fly like javelins and Daniel averts his eyes, focuses on the bottle of beer before his gaze turns as sharp.

He drops his gaze too late and Hannibal's voice floats up from the stream.

"Might want to ease up on the libation before battle."

Daniel holds his beer aloft as he peers into the stream. Caution screams from every pulsing membrane in his skull but his mouth is open before he can stop himself.

"Reveling on the eve of battle is traditional and encouraged I believe." Daniel calls down the slope.

"Does brave Hector find his courage in a bottle?" Hannibal says rubbing shampoo into his hair.

"Hannibal…" Will mutters, stops realizing the futility.

The taunt pricks and Daniel isn't sure if it's being called Hector that causes the hairs to rise along his neck or the swipe at his sobriety. He stubbornly takes another swig of the icy beer as his mind invariably sifts through the pages of the *Iliad* aware that is exactly what Hannibal wants. Daniel can't discover where Hannibal is leading unless he follows.

"Zeus decided this a long time ago and destiny overtakes me." Daniel says licking his lips, "I merely revel."

"Then stir yourself Reveling Hector, while gifts may still be had." Hannibal raises a very provocative brow and rubs the soapy cloth around his navel.

"And you will honor me like a god?" Daniel says, emboldened and allowing his gaze to drop appreciably lower.

"Enter the battle when the offer is gone and though you may turn the tide of battle, I will show you far less honor."

Daniel steps back from the edge of the embankment, "I have no need of such honor."

Hannibal likes provoking him and if this is the extent of Hannibal's amusement Daniel can live with it. He thinks of the kisses Hannibal has bestowed, the searchingly wet and wonderful kisses and thinks Hannibal might be serious about gifts. Again, he wonders whose emotions are influencing him knowing Hannibal is fully aware of the nature of the strings he continues to pull.

"There is no battle here." Will says, turning toward the opposite bank with a brusque sideswipe of his shoulder.

Hannibal notes the cool brush off, his nose trails the bare shoulder as he lifts his eyes to Will's. The cub's protectiveness of his little mouse is most endearing and expected, but the mouse requires a little nudge in the maze he entered with Will. He wonders if the mouse has figured out there is no escape from the maze.

He winks at Will before turning back to the embankment and to Daniel.

“Apparently there’s no reveling either. Perhaps Hector cleanses his palate of fear as he watches Achilles prepare for battle.”

The beer tingles on Daniel’s tongue as he narrows his eyes. “Not fear. But Hector thinks he detects the taste of hubris.”

The dear doctor is lying through his teeth, but he manages his fear rather well, perhaps a little of his patient has rubbed off on him. He throws his pointy barbs as well as Will.

“Does he? His own or Achilles’?” Hannibal counters.

“That depends. For whom does Achilles take up his armor?”

It’s a bold question and premature especially when there is suturing yet to be done. Hannibal understands. Daniel does not really expect an answer; he wants to slip into Hannibal’s emotions so he provokes them to the surface. Is the porridge too hot, or too cold? Clever mouse.

Will flinches beside him, waiting. No doubt Will wonders the same thing. But, Will knows better than to pose explicit inquiries when the answers may upset the status quo. Still, Hannibal is impressed again with Daniel’s straightforwardness. The candor is very refreshing as is Daniel himself this evening. The young doctor has changed his clothes, splashed on some cologne to squire them to the palazzo.

He rewards Daniel by blithely committing a sin of omission staring at Will the entire time.

“He takes up his armor for Agamemnon.”

Will shoves the tangled curls impatiently from his brow, eyes blinking back the water that streams from the soaked head. The blue eyes shift to Daniel and back again, but the beautiful mouth remains remarkably shut. Hannibal ponders the wet upturned face as he talks to Daniel.

“Achilles and Patroclus agreed to vanquish all the Greeks.” Hannibal says still gazing into pale blue eyes fixed in careful concentration.

“That they might conquer Troy, just the two of them.” Daniel’s says, the cloak of apprehension easing off his shoulders, “Troy’s ashes smolder under the hoses of the Firenze Fire Department. Mission accomplished. You have a tendency to tempt the Fates.”

Daniel points his half empty bottle at Hannibal and catches himself, thinks the madness must be infectious. He stands here taunting the naked narcissistic psychopath and Daniel feels only the stab of desire like the stinging of bees, little drops of fire.

Hannibal hears Daniel’s voice, but the words are Will’s. He looks up at the young doctor waving his beer around and he is overtaken by a vision of Will arguing with him in the salon, whiskey sloshing precariously as he paces by the harpsichord. For this, Hannibal gentles his response.

“It is Agamemnon who tempts the Fates.”

“Agamemnon tempts you; not the Fates.” Daniel says, trying to keep his tone conversational, like Hannibal’s. “You’ve already conquered fate. Patroclus stands by your side.”

Hannibal has every intention of keeping him there. But this is not the hubris Daniel seeks in the stream. He’s casting his rod with Agamemnon for the moment, a fisherman more like Will than he knows.

“Patroclus stands by your side as well. As for Agamemnon, Patroclus feels the injury of offense even more than Achilles.”

Hannibal glances at Will who nods, licks his lips tongue compulsively seeking the cut left by a well-placed boot.

“Pazzi deserves what’s coming.” Will agrees, eyes rolling up to Daniel.

Images of Ruggerio standing perplexed in Hannibal’s garden looking down the barrel of Will’s Beretta flash like strobe lights. These are quickly followed by flashes of Alia visiting him at the hospital.

If no one had followed me, or if Ruggerio had someone with him, he would still be alive. Did Pazzi send you here?

He said the Paolini might come and…to let them. See what they do, but not interfere.

Daniel already knows how Will *feels* about Pazzi. Daniel is suggesting that now, in this moment, Hannibal has what he wants so why risk losing what he has gained. Because Hannibal has introduced the epic narrative of the *Iliad*, Daniel’s characterization of their actions needs to be just as epic. Daniel wants to know how Hannibal feels about him. Will finds himself pondering Hannibal’s epic intentions as well.

Hannibal’s intentions regarding Daniel are not clear; he obscures and demurs all the while insisting that it is Patroclus’ actions that hold sway. Daniel has to be confused. Will certainly is. Hannibal promised no outright lies and their honest conversation earlier had felt especially and ardently authentic. There is truth in Hannibal’s words; it’s just a matter of sifting through all the poise and noise to find it. In the meantime, Daniel needs some reassurance and Will knows better than to challenge Hannibal in front of Daniel. Delivering an ultimatum would be insulting. The fangs would really come out then. Better to stroke Achilles’ heel than invite his wrath.

Daniel scrapes a thumbnail across the beer label, watches the sticky strips of orange float to the dirt. He thinks of Luciano’s leftovers stuffed in his trunk and wonders if adding the contents of his basement freezer to the grocery list of items he brought might have something to do with Pazzi. Pazzi is a multiple offender. Daniel understands Will’s righteous anger and won’t feel one iota of remorse once the deed is done. But, Pazzi’s sins are not the point. Geography is.

“You are planning to murder Pazzi at the Palazzo Vecchio for Christ’s sake. That constitutes plenty of hubris.” Daniel says.

Pazzi will be armed with bullets, as Hannibal already painfully knows, and it does not matter they will not be alone in the Palazzo Vecchio. Pazzi will shoot at either of them, even into a crowd of tourists to save his own neck.

“Balls.” Will says offhandedly, looking into the black water.

“What?”

“He said balls.” Hannibal grins. “Not hubris, balls. Will has succinctly if not crudely corrected your misconception. Murder in the Palazzo constitutes courage; reckless perhaps but hardly commensurate with hubris."

Daniel nods frustrated that his unease is neither aggravated nor assuaged by what he feels. From either of them.

You dwell on Hector's demise.

Well, yes. Wouldn't you?

Hector's sterling attributes were many, as are yours. You must admit, there are some parallels. The Iliad we write is not yet finished, is it?

Hannibal's words fail to entirely persuade. Daniel plunges ahead anyway, comforted by Will's presence, puzzled by his reticence.

"I still think the risk outweighs the benefits. But, I do bear the burden of being sane."

"The Fates are indifferent to sanity and sanity is highly subjective."

"Often relative." Will chimes in.

"Decidedly overrated." Hannibal says, brow wrinkling at the bits of paper Daniel flicks from his fingers. "Achilles did not fear fate."

Daniel immediately sees his mistake bringing sanity into the conversation. Whatever was he thinking? The three of them together do not even approach the semblance of sanity out here by the stream in the Tuscan night debating fate and discussing murder their discourse disseminated through the agreed upon template of the *Iliad*. They are the ideal of insanity, a metaphor for madness.

Daniel thinks fleetingly of his inevitable trial as he sits stiffly sweating his balls off on the witness stand and insisting all this…was therapy…

*"*Achilles fears nothing." Daniel winces, feeling the tether from Will's ship to his anchor grow taut as he struggles against the quickening current, "But, Achilles' fate is tied to Hector's. *If Hector dies your own doom must inexorably follow."*

"Ah, by doom you mean he may lose his Patroclus?"

Hannibal watches Daniel's head nod solemnly from atop the embankment. Will stands quietly massaging the bar of soap with his thumb in a repetitious circle. Hannibal looks into the expectant blue pools.

"Contemplating hubris?" Will asks with quiet directness. "Do I really have to posit your intentions on this?"

"I would take nothing from you that you were not prepared to give." Hannibal says.

Will looks into eyes as dark and glistening as the water flowing past his feet. It's not a trick answer, Will decides, it's the most honest answer Hannibal can offer at this moment. Trust blooms slowly, one rose at a time.

“Then tell him that.” Will says closing the space between them so Hannibal can practically taste his words. “Please.”

Hannibal trails his fingers over petulant lips so moist and soft they glide beneath his skin.

“For you.” Hannibal says.

“That inconvenient heel will haunt you.” The tender lips spread into a smile beneath his thumb.

“As it must. Just as uncertainty will haunt you. Throughout eternity…”

“I know.” Will says fingers pressing the flesh of Hannibal’s hand briefly to caress the lingering thumb.

Hannibal lets the lips slip away and turns to the pacing Daniel who has been watching with a nervous intensity. The deer among the wolves.

“Hector denied his fate while he pulled his spear from Patroclus and stripped him of his armor.” Hannibal recalls the ill-fated Hector’s brazen words as he had straddled the dying Patroclus, “*What makes you so sure of my swift destruction? Who knows but Achilles may be struck by my spear first and lose his life.”*

Will’s fingers float over his arm to find his wrist. Hannibal lifts a finger and the gentle hold about his wrist loosens. He does not look at Will rather his eyes remain fixed upon Daniel and the beautiful green eyes that flicker as the methodical mind careens through the maze.

Daniel takes a soothing sip of beer, recognizes the literal spear for the implied threat Hannibal seems to believe he presents. Perhaps Hannibal is seeking assurances before proffering promises of immunity for pinching Patroclus’ armor.

“Hector brings no spear; he brought his chariot. When Hector stripped Patroclus of his armor…” Daniel says carefully, “…he was unaware of Zeus or his…pursuit of Leda.”

“But he is aware now.” Hannibal prompts adopting the patient and paternal tone he has used with Daniel before.

“He is.” Daniel agrees, thinking of his conversation with Will and the possibilities ensuing from a universe where Nemesis forgives Zeus. “The *Iliad* you write is not yet finished…is it?”

Hannibal squeezes the wash cloth in his hands, looks from Daniel to Will.

“No. Hector should be pleased that Achilles has no desire to invite doom. Hubris would invite Nemesis’ ire, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose…” Daniel says, mind calling up the much maligned Boucher, his imagination filling in the rest.

“It was not hubris you tasted, but forgiveness. The taste still sweet upon Zeus’ tongue.” Hannibal says.

The large green eyes blink at Hannibal several times as Daniel pulls down his lower lip with the beer bottle.

“Satisfied?” Hannibal asks.

Hannibal rolls his head first to the drenched cub beside him then up toward the dry little mouse above. Will groans audibly and looks up at the sky immediately finding fascination in the constellations overhead. Hannibal thinks he hears approval somewhere beneath the exasperation. He waits quietly for the mouse.

“Evidently you are.” Daniel calls down.

Daniel wipes the sweat and beer from his mouth. The frayed nerves are somewhat soothed knowing Hannibal’s ominous oeuvre is now penned by two authors though he appears stuck with the dubious distinction of being cast as Hector. The veils between myth and reality hover like ghosts in the shadows of Daniel’s mind. He knows he isn’t going to bail and he sweeps the bothersome ghosts aside and focuses on doing something useful instead.

“I’m going to get the sutures ready while you finish up.” Daniel says after a long moment and turns to go but stops when Will calls out his name.

“Daniel?”

“Huh?”

Will slowly drops his gaze from the heavens and fixes on Daniel. He moves his hand over the silver scar across his stomach and takes a couple steps toward the bank making sure Daniel is looking at him. Daniel is. He touches his shirt in kind, smiles slightly and shakes his head.

Will nods and closes his eyes, relieved Daniel understands why there is no angry twinge pulsing along his scar. No wonder Daniel had seemed confused earlier as they had stood by the car. Accustomed to sensing Will’s anguish beneath his shirt, he had been baffled not to. Will had been too preoccupied to notice its absence in the avalanche of stimulation he’d been receiving. Neither has Will had time to process through the commotion replacing it.

“From your lips to God’s ear.”

Green eyes glitter with a look that warms Will immediately. As always, Daniel’s ocean mist quiets the uproar as it descends upon the tumultuous waves.

“Your advice.” Will counters.

“Yes, I suppose it was. Well, fuck me.” Daniel sighs, looks at his feet. “Forgiveness is transformative, Will.” he says with marked caution in his voice.

“I am very aware of that.” Will says glancing at Hannibal.

Daniel lifts his head, holds Will’s gaze a moment longer before waving him off to circle back around the Mercedes. Will watches him go before resuming his bath. Hannibal’s reassurance was typically self-serving but Daniel seemed to accept the saccharine sentiment. Will isn’t used to Hannibal being so cooperative and part of him keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop. He scrubs at the sore elbow bearing bruises from Cordell’s teeth aware of the dark gaze moving over him, the intensity searing and warm like little fires flaring up from scalp to toes.

Hannibal watches Will a moment longer noting with distinct pleasure the blush his staring summons across the smooth skin. The embarrassment crawling along the exquisite throat is part of the charm Hannibal would miss terribly should the day ever dawn that Will becomes completely comfortable with intimacy. Hannibal doubts he will see that day. He shifts his gaze from the breathtaking study in contradiction beside him to the dear doctor retreating quickly to the trunk of his Mercedes.

Hannibal leaves the little brown mouse to his remunerations and his beer. Ruffling his fur is entertaining, but too much ruffling may expose skin and Hannibal is aware of how thin Daniel's skin is where Will is concerned. There is no need to prick Will further either.

Daniel arranges the instruments and sutures from his medical bag on the clean towel he spreads out inside the trunk. Will has told him more than once that Hannibal enjoys playing games. Hannibal is in Daniel's head now, just like Will's, moving about like an incursion, a raid on his innermost thoughts. Commiseration runs deep, the sense of being violated is strong and the blade of vulnerability he shares with Will cuts just as deeply.

Will's act of forgiveness seems to have quieted the beast, at least shifted the focus of his torments from the trauma of being gutted to elsewhere in his mind and his inferno. Daniel does not believe that clearing out the Trojans in the slaughter house the kind of therapy Will needs to dispel the hallucinations and the blackouts, cathartic as he's sure it was. The forgiveness is a promising start.

Hannibal never vacated the real estate he occupies in Will's head, Daniel concedes Hannibal has taken up permanent residence there and with Hannibal's physical reappearance into Will's life and his mind; Daniel's therapy is no longer pure. Hannibal will gather the pieces and distill them to his preferred essence and greedily drink Will up. This time, Will is allowing Hannibal to do it with permission. And Daniel understands why. He feels the security it brings to Will. Will is crazy and with Hannibal he finds acceptance. He also receives a lot of encouragement to indulge his madness.

He can see it plain as day every time he looks up from the back of the Mercedes.

His perspective is tainted by Hannibal's lens. He helped Will polish the lens and Daniel finds himself drawn into Hannibal's universe, the imagery too seductive to ignore. As Will pours water from the plastic jug over Hannibal to rinse the shampoo from his hair Daniel sees Patroclus tipping an amphora over the golden head of his Achilles.

Achilles begins to gasp for air, shaking his head but Patroclus continues to pour, murmuring words only Achilles can hear. His words do not mollify however, and Achilles grabs the offending wrist and the water ceases to flow over his head. Patroclus offers the amphora to Achilles, laughing, and fills his palm with shampoo. He raises his arms over his head, stretching as he does a long languorous stretch and begins to lather his hair. Achilles squats low in the water to refill the amphora, chin up and eyes riveted to Patroclus's every move.

"I do like your little mouse but I think I've plucked a nerve." Hannibal says as he watches Will's fingers move through the thick curls, water gurgling into the plastic jug.

"*My* little mouse or yours?" Will says, half joking half not.

"I suppose he's ours."

The fingers pause, "Is that still how you see him? A mouse?"

Hannibal fusses with the plastic jug before he responds waiting for the impatient pursing of lips as Will stands with his arms still raised over his head. *One, two, three…* As hoped for, the bruised lips purse and pucker and, in an unexpected bonus, Will even rolls his eyes. Hannibal has missed this *so* much…

"How do you see him?" Hannibal counters, "He's not a wolf. He is still caught in your maze."

"My maze." Will repeats the word crisply. "The design is ours. I told him he should leave. Told him that was exactly what he should do. He didn't."

"Jack offered you an out, more than once."

I'm not your father Will…

"Is that how he characterized it? He told me if I wanted to *quit* to go ahead. Or he'd ask if he'd broken me."

"Uncle Jack plays his head games, too."

Will lifts a cautionary brow but remains quiet.

Hannibal remembers his numerous conversations with Jack about Will. Jack had confided to Hannibal Will wouldn't stop even though Will knew the profiling was hurting him, had lamented over him in his hospital bed, bewailing how broken Will was. Jack had quickly abandoned him at BSHCI and later, Jack hadn't deterred Will from returning to therapy with Hannibal, probably didn't caution Will even once, but had heaped on guilt and disappointment when Will had failed to show results. Jack had also been unable to desert Will completely during his trial, taking some of the blame for putting him out there. Hannibal wonders still how much of that was guilt on Jack's part and how much of it stemmed from Jack's highly developed sense of situational morality.

Jack wasted no time pulling Will out of protective custody and packing him off to Florence with Verger money.

Jack has never been a father, but he knows how to act like one. Knows enough about Will, or thinks he does to exploit Will's empathy and capitalize on his position of authority when it suits him. Hannibal had caught glimpses of Jack's management of Will in the museum while they had mused over Tier's killer. Replaying the memory of observing Jack and Will from the stairwell crystalizes the dynamic between Jack and Will, especially when compared to the dynamic between Will and him.

"Jack never had a chance playing the father card with you, did he?"

Will wipes his face with the cloth and leans in close. "Our honest conversation does not extend that far."

Hannibal looks into the eyes that do not waver and says nothing more, allows Will his space. The seed already sprouting, Hannibal will wait until the flower that blooms is sturdy enough to withstand scrutiny before he plucks it. Will's attitude toward authority had been obvious from the beginning and Hannibal had taken to referring to Crawford as Uncle Jack immediately grasping the opportunity to create discord.

Sons invariably challenge fathers; they outgrow them as they must. Sons with bones to pick with dear old dad tend to gravitate to objectionable playmates, especially playmates that share their attitudes and applaud their predilections. Sons are conditioned to desire approval, even sons for whom paternal approval has long since ceased to matter or for sons who have never experienced it in the first place, and they seek it out, respond to it for a little while until they eventually begin to chafe under the expectations that come with it.

Boys outgrow their mentors as well. But mentors, unlike fathers, can become something else. Hannibal rubs his washcloth over his front, one more cursory sweep as Will stares off into space. Daniel does not qualify as a playmate, father, or mentor. He occupies a unique place Hannibal cannot reach. He is very much an anchor and Hannibal suspects that though Will may be considering how best to hoist up and cast off, the prospect of braving an uncharted sea without his anchor is difficult to embrace.

But, as Hector recently reminded them, he brought his chariot. There is no need to cut the anchor just yet.

Will sighs as he wrings the terry in his hands, a tired woeful note; it sears across Hannibal's heart like a bow to a string. Will's attachments are not many, but they run deep.

"You didn't answer my question." Hannibal says, "How do you see him?"

"There are two melodies running through my head," Will says, thinking of Daniel's analogy, "I am…enamored with both and loath to part with either."

"Orchestrations of carbon vibrating in synchrony as a duet. The timbre of this particular violin is too fragile to withstand a trio."

"Then, you shouldn't have made grandiose overtures to the contrary."

"A thorough conductor imposes rehearsals. Rehearsal is almost over."

"So you keep reminding me."

"He has been your anchor he said."

"He has."

"Does he remain outside your inferno or does he make appearances like I do?"

Will considers the question, decides to let his paddle steer for the moment. It is, after all, a very informed paddle, familiar with the currents of this particular stream.

"He makes appearances from time to time."

Hannibal considers carefully the notes he is about to play. He could probe deeper, solicit from Will the form those appearances take, but his touch upon the keys is light and the hammer strikes a harmonious chord.

"When did his appearances start? Not with the initial consultation I assume."

"No. Later. After I…moved in with him."

"Before or after…intimacy?"

Will thinks. It's a valid question. He remembers the fishing trip and returning to the fire at his apartment. "After. The moving in and the intimacy were nearly simultaneous as to make the order irrelevant."

"Rather dismissive. Your perspective is not objective."

"Neither is yours."

"Even so, was the decision to become intimate made independent of moving in, or was it something that naturally followed?"

The blue eyes glitter and Hannibal can only guess at the thoughts tumbling around behind them, but the lips remain stubbornly closed.

"You need to ask yourself how your dreams reflect your reality." Hannibal brushes the equally stubborn curls from the furrowed brow catching a dribble of lather with his finger. "Dreams prepare us, but your dreams intrude on your waking life. Seek a pattern. There is always a correlation between the physical world and the imagined, especially with you."

"There has been a progression of sorts." Will admits, rubbing his head full of suds. "The landscape has changed with the therapy it seems."

"How?"

"I didn't just drop into my inferno, I wandered into it. The sessions at Daniel's office became more fruitful I suppose."

"You wandered into it after your palazzo burned down and you moved in with him." Hannibal says as Will nods. "Your sessions…no longer conducted at his office. Therapy became entwined with living, the lines blurred, indistinct."

"Even more so after the hypnotherapy."

"Not performed at his office."

"No, his home."

"His therapy, like mine, designed to find the true self amidst the pieces."

"Your constructive destruction. I think it was more like sifting through the pieces you had shattered."

"Apparently, I did not shatter all. He has relieved you of the remaining pieces and your inferno is a construct of the pieces."

Will thinks of the path taken as he had descended into his inferno. He tries to see possible correlations with the transformation of the stag and the appearance of the wolf, his fearsome companion, winged Daniel, and the viper. Daniel did say that his hallucinations were fractured pieces of self, floating in the miasma of his imagination in search of coherence. Hannibal is correct. His inferno has transformed as he has. Will wonders if the dreams mirror reality or the other way around. He exists in the surreal, perpetually perched on the event horizon of chaos.

“My inferno is a puzzle I can take apart?”

“Perhaps. Provided you have all the pieces. Are you still missing pieces?”

“I haven’t really taken inventory.”

Hannibal reaches across the stream, grasps Will’s neck and draws his thumb over stubble and soft skin.

“You have. Your mind is trying to tell you. Loudly. Emotions influence our dreams and emotions can often interfere with interpreting our dreams.”

Killing is changing the way I think…

I have killed. We…have killed together. You saw what was left of me bleeding out on your kitchen floor.

I did. And you are still very, very angry, Will. What is to be done about that?

Forgiveness is transformative, Will.

“Dreams prepare us for waking life, your dreams tantamount to a rehearsal.”

Hannibal watches the clouds descending upon the pools of blue. Will turns aside, depriving Hannibal of his window. So infuriating…

Will stares into the black rippling stream. His waking life keeps shifting; it is in a constant state of upheaval it seems. How does one prepare for that? Certainly not by casting oneself adrift. Will runs his fingers through shampoo soaked locks, glances at the Mercedes, and decides to extend the rehearsal a little longer.

“Besides Hector, which he clearly does not like…any other pet names I should know about?”

Hannibal readies the jug, holds it over Will’s head to rinse the crown of suds. His lips twist with the improbability of washing out the denial with the suds.

“For him? No. Several for you.”

I’ll bet.” Will doesn’t bite.

“And your pet names for me? Besides Satan.”

“I already told you, I have plenty.” Will says, resuming the scrawl of fingers over his scalp as he smiles sweetly at Satan. His Satan.

And that poison, that kiss a thousand times accursed!

Daniel glugs some more beer and unable focus with the two of them splashing around beneath the halo of the headlights, wanders around to the front of the car. The dim headlights bathe the two figures below in a gauzy glow that only adds to the surreal. Impressions and thoughts fill his mind as emotions flood elsewhere pooling precisely in the most awkward of places. He tugs at his trousers before looking down into the stream again.

It's Achilles who holds the amphora over Patroclus now, but as he watches Hannibal rinse Will's head Daniel thinks it's more like watching the Anti-Christ douse his doting disciple. Will the Baptist leans on his savior as blood and past transgressions are washed away in the River Jordan. But, Daniel thinks wryly as he remunerates upon his own revised testament, the covenant symbolized by the cleansing is not to go and sin *no* more; it's to go and sin *some* more. A lot more. The Baptist has told everyone of the Anti-Christ's coming, but the Anti-Christ and his beloved Baptist are the only two in the river. They have found salvation in each other.

Daniel finishes off his beer, sighs as he looks at the cooler. He shouldn't be casting stones and certainly not at Will. He can hear Jack Crawford's voice in his head*, And how did you spend your evening, Doctor Clayton?* He clenches the bottle in his fist tempted to hurl it into the grove, shatter it against the closest tree. Daniel huffs. He'll just feel badly about leaving broken glass for the animals and probably cut himself picking it all up. Daniel tosses the empty bottle into the trunk to join the other one. He thinks it is going to be another very long night.

Will is tumbling in emotions down in the stream with Hannibal and not all of them deserving of the thin smile perpetually brimming on Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal may know Will, perhaps better than Will knows himself, but that is a debate for the two of them. Hannibal can guess Will's feelings; Daniel actually feels them. For this reason he knows the book is not closed on his inferno yet. Will stands in the Cocytus of his inferno, neither in nor out, dancing with his Mephistopheles.

Daniel watches the devoted disciple stumble in the current, steadying himself with one hand firmly grasping the sturdy unwounded shoulder while the dark Lord of Hell massages the suds from the Baptist's bowed head, having moved heaven and earth to possess that head. But, Hannibal doesn't desire to move heaven and earth at this particular moment. He wants only to move Will, an infinitely more delicate task. Daniel can't hear their words but he decides Will has definitely been moved.

Will watches Hannibal as he washes his legs and feet. He has to bend almost in half to avoid aggravating the exposed wound to his thigh but he is engrossed in the task and Will's mind drifts with the stream in the quiet reprieve.

He closes his eyes listening to the sound of the stream's passage as black water gurgles around the tire sized rocks lining the embankment and flows past his legs. It's a singular sound that summons memories of a solitary existence he is likely to never experience again.

The large stones he feels beneath his feet are smooth and slippery, embedded for centuries in the cold mud that squishes between his toes. The water here barely brushes their knees and the current is navigable without having to lean too much on each other. Will smiles to himself. Hannibal is beyond ecstatic with all the leaning.

Will thinks it amazing what a difference a couple shots can make. Hannibal moves slowly but in complete command of his limbs after receiving a few well-placed doses of Lidocaine. The numbness Will feels on the left side of his face is a welcome change from the searing seam Cordell had carved there.

Daniel had also come prepared with B12 injections. Hannibal had been rummaging through Daniel's medical bag, with Daniel's permission of course, while Daniel had been examining the wound to his thigh. The look on Hannibal's face as he had pulled the prepared syringes out should have stopped Daniel's heart, but Hannibal had looked into the large emerald eyes and the accusing splinters of ice had melted immediately.

May I?

Um….

Vitamins?

Well, what else? I took an oath to do no harm. Didn't you?

I did. Apparently you didn't cross your fingers…

Will also attributes his current vigor to gulping down a couple bottles of water and decides standing in the refreshingly cool current helps. Memories of his fishing trip with Daniel gnaw at the edges of Will's mind, one of many thoughts stirring in the mist that encroaches and withdraws much like the ocean tide Will thinks of when Daniel is near.

Will can see him from the stream if he cranes his neck, his retreat from Hannibal probably wise given Hannibal's appetite for mouse this evening. His slender silhouette moves behind the headlights as he paces above. The distance from the stream to the Mercedes is about the same as from the bottom of Daniel's driveway to his front porch, but Will feels the distance between them acutely, more so for Hannibal's presence, a tangible thing he feels in his mind that seems to wrap itself around everything else like the washcloth he holds in his hands.

Hannibal dips his cloth into the stream, accustomed to Will's silences and aware Will's thoughts flow with the stream, pale blue eyes already drowning in associations and memory and floating again into those places Hannibal cannot reach. Not yet.

"Turn around. I'll wash your back then you can wash mine." Hannibal says, hands already guiding shoulders toward him.

Will lets Hannibal guide him, angles his head down so fingers and terry can glide along his flesh. The touch is efficient though not brusque, never brusque. Hannibal's fingers always have a way of lingering and no matter how brief the touch, the touch is always deeply felt. The hands that have touched him so many times touch him now drawing soft grunts, pressing into bruises he had not even known were there. As Will focuses on keeping his balance he thinks he feels pretty good all things considered.

Hannibal scrubs lower along his back, pauses to drench and soap up the cloth again and with the simple turn of his body to follow Hannibal's movements he catches a flicker of movement in the stream, a thread against the current.

"This stream must eventually flow into the Arno at some point." Hannibal says, snapping Will from his reverie as he likely intended.

Will blinks water out of his eyes as Hannibal's hands move from his back around front to press soap and cloth into his hands as wet hips and cock press seductively into the crack of his ass. Will arches his back, hums softly with the pleasant prickling of flesh and takes the cloth and soap slowly, enjoying the moment. Hannibal must have an exit strategy. He always does. For a few seconds he considers they could leave now; forget about Pazzi, Du Maurier, Lounds, Jack…

The warm slippery flesh retreats and Hannibal's hands fall away.

“My turn.” Hannibal says, “The Arno has several tributaries. This entire basin extends from Tuscany to Arezzo.”

“Accounts for the fertile land, all that mountain soil flows down with it.” Will says not really interested, but used to Hannibal’s meandering. He’s sure there’s a point somewhere.

“The entire basin is filled with unpolluted streams such as this. Pity to piss in it.”

Will chuckles and glances around at Hannibal whose hands have moved to take business in hand. Out of the corner of his eye Will sees movement in the water again, thinks perhaps it’s just a trick of the light from the Mercedes flickering over the surface or Hannibal relieving himself in the rippling stream, but another splash registers and another. Will feels the sleek and solid pass of something across his ankles.

“Did you feel that?” Will stoops to peer into the water.

“Feel what?”

“Something in the water…”

“No. What did it feel like?” Hannibal glances at the shimmering surface, a futile exercise since the water is too dark to see anything.

“Cold, a brush of fins? Maybe a fish.” Will shifts his feet. “There it is again. You don’t feel that?”

“No.”

Don’t lie to me…please don’t lie to me…

Will sighs stares stubbornly into the shimmering surface. He sees nothing in the darkness as he tugs at the facecloth in his hands impatient for Hannibal to finish pissing. Aware that Daniel is observing, however unobtrusively, and a bit alarmed by the unseen but persistent swishing around his feet, Will is determined to finish quickly and get out of the stream. He moves intending to stand behind Hannibal and stops cold.

“It’s a…a…snake…” Will lifts his feet unsteadily, holding on to Hannibal and cannot believe Hannibal does not feel it moving across his ankles.

“It’s right there…in the water...”

Don’t lie to me…please don’t lie to me…

“Will, there’s nothing there.”

No, no, you’re lying…

Will, we’re alone. You came here alone.

You’re not alone, Will. I’m standing right beside you.

What’s happening to me?

Apparently, I’m never alone…

Will, Will, Will. You're having an episode…I want you to hand me over the gun…Will…

I want all of you, Will. The fractured pieces, too…

He watches the oily black plumes erupt along Hannibal's limbs and torso obscuring the flesh he knows is there, before long he is standing knee deep in the water with his infernal companion and he feels his body sprouting the familiar downy sheen between legs and across his back. His glossy wings dip into the water as he steadies himself.

"Your inferno?" Hannibal asks as Will nods, eyes wide with images Hannibal cannot see, or even begin to imagine. "What do you see?"

"I…"

The single syllable cracks. Hannibal hangs on the sorrowful note a moment as he peers into the stormy blue sea. Trust may have bloomed, but it is a tender blossom easily overshadowed in a garden still full of weeds. Hannibal does not know how much Will remembers of the night he brought Abel Gideon to his home in a fevered haze, his brain burning up with encephalitis, but that memory will not serve them here.

"This isn't Baltimore." Hannibal's tone is gentle, "We've razed that past and I had hoped poured salt over it."

"The salt has a familiar taste." Will says the bitterness already upon his tongue.

He looks into eyes that shift from amber to deepest brown to a reflection of his own blue. He knows Hannibal tastes the residue, too. Hannibal knows his hallucinations superimpose themselves over his reality until real and unreal are so fused Will cannot tell the difference. He extended Hannibal an invitation to his inferno. His inferno is here. And yet…

Past associations are so difficult to overcome. Trust is such a fragile flower.

Doubt skims like pebbles across the surface of the reservoir of memories that opens up in Will's mind. He looks into the solemn face that shifts with the shadows, flesh and feathers merging before his eyes. The amber hued eyes glitter inside the blood red rims and he thinks of Hannibal's words to him upon waking in the grove earlier.

It is my professional opinion you just had a seizure of some kind.

Another seizure…of some kind…

He's had a mild seizure. That doesn't seem to bother you.

I said it was mild.

Did you check for encephalitis?

He shuts his eyes tight concentrates on the now, on this moment, this Hannibal. He opens one eye then the other, but the feathers are still there, huge black wings extend like a shroud over Hannibal's head. He feels the wet feathers like ripples of ice over his body. The scaly thing inside has returned to slip along his spine and Will can feel it forcing itself through vertebrae, sinew and skin. Bone then flesh ruptures along his lower back and Will stands perplexed, unsure how to even begin to describe the madness in his head to Hannibal. He hasn't been able to figure it out himself.

“Will…” Hannibal says, cradling the damp head in his hands, “I’m your paddle, remember?”

Will nods as his fingers press more forcefully into his Hannibal’s arms seeking traction to keep from falling into the slippery stream. Hannibal’s nose nuzzles his cheek; soft lips alight upon whiskers to pause at his chin. Will opens his mouth, drinks again from the cup Hannibal offers. He tastes not bitter poison but wine and it washes the rancor of Baltimore away.

Hannibal turns toward the bank and shouts, “Daniel!”

“An olive branch?” Will says. “Oh, there must be something in it for you.”

“Impetuous Patroclus, ever plagued by his empathy. If you can’t trust me, how can you trust yourself? It’s a swiftly running river Cocytus, treacherous current. You’ll require an anchor.” Hannibal nods toward the Mercedes.

“My anchor will…validate my paddle.” Will says already drifting away.

“Precisely.” Hannibal strokes a thumb over the wet cheek as the shadows Will chases overtake him.

“What the fuck is going on?” Daniel pierces the quiet trickling of the stream from atop the embankment.

The edge to Hannibal’s voice had sent a blade of ice down his back and caused his gut to lurch. After Daniel had rounded the car and looked down the embankment, the reason for the sharp tone had become apparent. As he looks down upon the two of them clutching each other in the water, he takes a breath slipping into the suit of therapist. It’s a comfortable suit, one that Daniel can wear with confidence.

Daniel picks up the clean towels from the ground as he peers over the incline, eases to the ground, preparing to assist.

Hannibal looks up at the figure squatting beside the beam of headlights, towels draped over his arm. The hesitation doesn’t last long and Daniel starts down the incline sideways, leather loafers slipping in the damp dirt. Hannibal holds up a finger and Daniel pauses at the water’s edge. Will’s fingers continue to grip his shoulders as he leans on Hannibal and Hannibal braces himself against the current, his body flush with Will’s.

Daniel nods slowly at Hannibal and remains silent. He’s tempted to take off his shoes and wade out, but Hannibal’s finger remains up so he paces along the bank instead.

“Will, let it come. I’ve got you.”

…right where I want you…

Right where you are supposed to be.

Where I want to be.

Will hears Hannibal, fully cognizant that it is he who stands in the water with him, calling his name not the creature of his inferno. He needs to know what his mind is trying to tell him and he does not fight or retreat from the images spilling from his subconscious.

The thing slithering between his feet against the current is not the serpentine tail of his infernal companion, however. The tail that climbs up his legs and winds around his midriff is his own. He watches as the tail of the creature rises from the dark water and coils about his wrists, spirals around his forearm like a sleek and pulsing bracelet.

See, Will? Do you see?

I'm trying…

Will grasps the creature more tightly and it ducks its head so its beak touches the water. Will tugs his arm back until the scaly tail retreats from his arm and sinks into the stream. The creature slices its beak through the water and Will knows it is ripping off its own tail as it did before when the viper invaded his inferno. The large amber eyes look down at the tail twining through plumes dark as dusk up Will's leg.

And now yours.

The great beak disappears below the surface and Will knows it tears the twitching tail from him as he clenches feathers in his hands.

"Will…"

Hannibal struggles to hold Will still as he flinches. Hannibal turns to Daniel. "This is not a retreat. This…is not what happens when he profiles a crime scene."

"I know. He's not asleep, but he's not awake either. It's like he's existing…"

"…within two realities. Each as real as the other. Fascinating."

"Upsetting I would think."

"Part of the process."

"Process?"

"Of waking up to who he is."

Will feels the tugging of flesh as the tail breaks free. Red rimmed eyes peer up at him as it lifts its head the beak darkly stained and sticky as syrup. He follows the creature's gaze to the opposite bank. Together, the tails, now serpents slither out of the water, a trail of shiny black slick behind them. He knows if he looks down he'll see red tinged water so he doesn't look. He watches the serpents circle one another on the bank but instead of fighting as Will had expected they entwine, each swallowing the other's tail.

Will hears the hiss of Hannibal's voice in his ear, but Hannibal still stands in front of him and his lips are not moving.

What are you hiding from me, Will?

I revealed myself to you.

Not all. You're still missing pieces of yourself and I would have them all.

What pieces? Where?

Where did you enter the Gates of Hell and descend into your inferno?

Will is surprised by the sound of rustling feathers as the Winged Daniel of his inferno descends from the grove advancing quickly toward the serpents. The furry head of his grey wolf appears over the edge of the embankment behind him. Daniel's naked form seems to glide over the mud and stones, wings white and delicate as the frost that trails like diamond dust along the ground. The large green eyes hold Will's gaze as Daniel bends down and lifts the writhing ring from the sopping bank. He holds it out to Will.

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

You must allow yourself to become comfortable with your instincts, Will.

Instinct follows emotion.

It does. What are you feeling?

Frustrated.

Because you are…incomplete.

Will lifts his eyes and sees ivy and tiny pink rosebuds climbing up the embankment, the leaves and petals crystal clear in the moonlight but flat, more like pieces of paper that would scatter along the bank with a single breath. His grey wolf turns tail, pauses on the white bank and turns back to level its shaggy head at Will. It lifts a paw from the fluffy snow as though waiting for him and then it runs off into the snow crusted woods on the other side.

See? On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Hiding and revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics.

Hannibal watches the exquisite brow furrow; the lips quiver as though Will is talking to himself. Will's body is responding to the environment of his mindscape, evidence that his hallucinations are also auditory. When we dream our bodies do not move, our brains paralyze us unless the dream is especially vivid or the individual is afflicted with a neural disorder that disrupts the natural process of sleep. Since Will is prone to sleepwalking it is not surprising that his overactive imagination invites other manifestations that defy the normal paralysis that accompanies sleep.

But, Will is not actually asleep. Will is experiencing what he imagines, as he had in the grove, as he had while pumped up with drugs at Boboli. As, Hannibal is certain, he had done with Daniel during his hypnotherapy.

Hannibal observes Will's eyes sweep along the bank, eyes clearly tracking something as his body shudders and legs fidget in the water. So fascinating…his Will.

"Did you talk to him before, during the hypnotherapy?"

"From time to time to make sure he was safe. I had hoped for a guided regression but that didn't quite work out how I planned."

"Nothing ever does with Will."

“I don’t know. Seems to be working out okay for you.” Daniel says, his tone cooler than he intended.

“You asked me to save Will. I am attempting to do so. You are more familiar with his inferno than I. Your professional opinion would be appreciated.” Hannibal says with mild reproach, just a touch.

Daniel tugs at the collar sticking to his neck lank with humidity as he looks at Hannibal across the water. Though the damp fabric is not really the source of his discomfort. He recognizes a scold when he hears it. He recognizes opportunism when he sees it, too.

“Did he hallucinate at the slaughter house or here?”

“Less pronounced at the slaughter house and here…” Hannibal pauses, considers another sin of omission and decides the mouse is right; honesty breeds more of the same. There’s no telling whether Will is aware of their conversation or not. Habits…

“Here, the hallucinating culminated with a mild seizure, at least a complete loss of consciousness for several seconds.”

“He’s had blackouts with me, but nothing like that. Any idea what caused it?” Daniel thinks he has some idea.

“My best guess is sensory overload in the absence of drugs or illness. According to Will, you have been quite thorough with his treatment.”

“For a little while, he was completely clean, even keeping a diet log.” Daniel smiles tightly, “I take it he has discussed his dreams with you?”

“Not yet, but there are no obstacles to discussing them now.”

“Okay. What were you talking about before he um…tuned out?”

“He said there was a snake in the water. Of course, there isn’t. Thoughts?”

“Lots of thoughts. He’s talking to you, Hannibal.” Daniel says lifting a brow.

Hannibal narrows his eyes. “Indeed.” He says simply.

He catches Will when he lurches forward suddenly. Will’s hands knead his shoulders, a rhythmic squeezing Hannibal knows well as Will tries to ground himself. Time to find out if the cub cringing in the water can tender truth as well as he does kisses. Hannibal pulls Will close, embraces the rigid body and strokes the wet curls dripping onto his neck. Will relaxes immediately against him. The body recalls its conditioning, but conditioning is colliding with imagination. Hannibal waits listening to Will breathe.

“I’d like to get out now.” Will says into Hannibal’s neck, turning his head to look at Daniel. “It’s cold.”

Will stands behind Hannibal, Daniel’s thick towel tied about his waist as Hannibal sits sideways along the bumper. It’s an awkward position to sit in, but Hannibal endures the discomfort of the contorted angle with his usual stoicism. Daniel is suturing the gash in Hannibal’s thigh and Will is to suture the deep gouge on the back of his shoulder, the only wound besides the stab wound to the thigh that did not stop bleeding after leaving the stream.

Will had received his sutures almost immediately. Thanks to the Lidocaine, he feels only a little tightness along his jaw and eyes if his face moves too much, so he doesn't move it. Not a particularly difficult thing to manage. Will isn't much concerned about the scarring the wound will leave, but has been assured his present hairstyle will camouflage it *satisfactorily.* Will was evidently not effusive enough with his gratitude to suit his surgeon.

Daniel had stood by the trunk with his surgical instruments at the ready, indicating Hannibal should take a seat so he could stitch up the thigh wound, but Hannibal was having none of that.

Will first.

Will's wound isn't bleeding every time he moves. I'll take care of him after I finish this. First rule of triage: worst wounds first.

I'm sure your surgical skills are adequate, I wouldn't let you stitch up my leg otherwise, but I think I'll take care of Will's face myself. May I?

Hannibal had plucked the package of sutures and needle from Daniel's fingers and had deftly threaded the needle and secured it in its holder before Daniel could contest the decision. Will had simply sat down on the bumper and had tried to alleviate the stung expression on Daniel's face by changing the subject to the assortment of sandwiches he had thoughtfully included in the cooler. Hannibal's pointed gallantry has continued unabated much to Daniel's consternation which has only invited more of the same.

Will stares now at the multiple gashes that mar the smooth surface of the muscular back. The Casaletto boy had broken skin in several places but must have been intent upon delivering quick cuts rather than a concentrated effort to impale one location. Panic, Will thinks. Both of the brothers were acquainted with violence, had likely maimed or killed before, but Mason's porcine soiree had unnerved them. They had been so unnerved that they had listened to Pazzi, disregarding instinct and opting for blind obedience only to regret it, horribly.

The wound is not terribly long, but it is deep. Will begins the first suture and would be entirely focused on the minutia of his task but for his recent hallucination and its dissection by his two psychiatrists. His input is apparently not required at the moment, so he has been alternately listening and drifting, allowing his mind to assimilate the jumble of impressions and associations he feels buried beneath. Avalanche no longer seems an adequate metaphor for the assault.

A ball of yarn, Will thinks. His mind is unraveling like a huge ball of grandma's multicolored yarn sitting in a wicker basket next to an overstuffed couch. As he pulls on the yarn the strands come apart and as the colors change with each tug so the varied and seemingly infinite images tumble from his head. There is order within the apparent chaos, but the yarn is knotted and faded in places and it is impossible to construct anything with the yarn in its present state.

He is so absorbed with his ball of yarn that he nearly drops the needle when Hannibal's voice cracks in his ear.

"What do you think, Will? Are you listening?" Hannibal is saying fingers curled around the bottom of the bumper.

“I am now.”

“That’s quite a jumbled assortment of images in your inferno, Will.”

“Well, that would be consistent with my life.”

“Not accidental, either.” Daniel says, looking up from Hannibal’s leg. “We agree your inferno is a mirror of your reality.”

“My fractured pieces are having themselves a little party at my expense.”

“Yes, and thank you for the invitation.” Hannibal says.

“Not…my kind of party.” Daniel dabs the wound in preparation for another suture.

“All of the therapy, mine and his, has been about you waking up to who you are. It’s your inferno. You are its architect, the construct is yours.” Hannibal says.

“And as its architect, its arrangement is dependent on your perceptions, experiences, and emotions.” Daniel says.

“Daniel’s Gestalt jolted your awareness and the hypnotherapy accelerated your descent. You did say your inferno started after you moved in…”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying I somehow triggered his inferno?” Daniel’s hand hovers over the bared thigh, the rest of Hannibal but an inch or two of terrycloth away.

“Not triggered, but your conversations gave it shape. It has continued to evolve as your therapy and external events have progressed and become part of Will’s mindscape.”

“A mindscape nurtured in Baltimore.” Will says.

“Daniel has intuitively continued what was begun in Baltimore, yes, albeit a little less…viscerally.”

“So my imagination has taken the pieces you two have stripped down…”

“Your armor, yes.” Hannibal interjects casting a glance at a very perturbed Daniel who immediately starts chewing at his lip.

“Patroclus has a nasty habit of picking up his armor in pieces.” Hannibal says almost as absently as he offers Daniel more clean gauze from the medical bag.

“What pieces?” Daniel says, exasperated.

He quickly picks the roll of gauze from Hannibal’s outstretched palm tossing Hannibal a look that Will thinks could cut glass. Daniel turns an apprehensive eye to Will before returning to his suturing.

Will looks from Hannibal to Daniel and back again wondering what prompts this charged exchange between them. Whatever it is, Hannibal is getting a lot of mileage out of it. Daniel’s frustration about pieces echoes Will’s and Will thinks that not insignificant or coincidence.

“My mind has reassembled the pieces so I can talk to myself in some kind of what? An inner monologue peppered with poetry and fairy tales?”

“Actually, that is pretty close to what we think is going on.” Daniel says.

“You’ve been subjected to the process of constructive destruction which assumes there is a self beneath the layers of the other selves, the aspects of what we refer to as personality.”

“My becoming.”

“Your acceptance of your becoming. You’ve emerged from the cocoon.”

“The integration of conscious and unconscious aspects of personality, to find the total self.” Daniel clarifies.

“The true self.” Hannibal further clarifies as Will sighs behind him.

Daniel gives Hannibal a hard look. Daniel thinks he had been too frightened or too medicated to notice how grating the arrogance could be. Will deals with the arrogance his own way which is not an avenue open to Daniel. Hannibal is not in love with Daniel.

Will has chosen to see what he wants to see in Hannibal, at least ignoring what he has decided no longer concerns or bothers him. But Daniel sees Hannibal in a much less forgiving light. In fact, Daniel has the advantage of seeing Hannibal through a split lens, sort of like bifocals he thinks. Will has experienced Hannibal up close and personal and it was through Will that Daniel had learned to see Hannibal. But, Hannibal is no longer a phantom in Will’s inferno. The flesh and blood monster is here to compete with the ones in Will’s head. It is Daniel who wears the corrective lenses to adjust for the conditioning and the confused attachments. Will does not suffer from the emotional equivalent of presbyopia or myopia; Will is capable of seeing Hannibal within a larger context. Will is not limited to the immediate Hannibal. Will can predict, see into the distance. But Hannibal does remain out of focus because Will has developed astigmatism with regard to Hannibal. Like the optical defect that astigmatism is, the defect in Will’s’ lens with Hannibal is his empathy.

Will’s emotional astigmatism does not allow Will to see himself clearly through Hannibal’s eyes. Will has fractured himself into pieces trying to see Hannibal, looking for him in his inferno in order to understand and accept who he was, who he had become, who it was that had survived the trauma of Baltimore. Daniel had told Will that everything he needed to know about Hannibal was already in his head; he just had to find it.

We’re just alike. We’re both alone without each other.

Daniel thinks Hannibal’s words to Will were more than just a mantra designed to buttress his conditioning and influence. They are just alike. Hannibal can longer see himself without Will. And if Will could see himself as Hannibal does he would truly know Hannibal and never doubt his place in their exclusive universe.

“So, if I’m interacting with fragments of myself in my dreams, hallucinations, then my *true* self has been released.” Will tugs on another suture.

“But, not fully realized.” Hannibal says.

“Because the subconscious continues to intercept, interrupt. We’ve already talked about your subconscious speaking to you through your dreams.” Daniel says.

“Your mind is unique, Will. You think in images and because your conscious world is interpreted in images, your subconscious communicates in symbols, too.”

“I see Jung all over the place.” Daniel says, “You’re thinking in archetypes.”

“The collective unconscious. We’ve talked about that.” Will says.

“So have Daniel and I. You’ve created a narrative within your therapy, invited all your pieces along so you could sort them out in your own Odyssey.”

“A narrative within a narrative within a narrative.” Will says, “And while my conscious and unconscious play around in my inferno what is my subconscious doing?”

“The subconscious functions as our memory recall. The stuff that runs in the background while you are consciously engaged in something else. I don’t need to consciously remember how to get to work every day kind of thing.”

“I understand how it usually works,” Will smiles, “How does it work for me?”

“For you? It’s always switched on and in this particular instance, I think it holds memories of something you don’t want to remember, or the connection has been short circuited and is still under repair.”

“Right…we talked about this before.” Will clips the last suture. “Hand me some gauze? I’ll bandage this up.”

Hannibal turns around on the bumper to pass the roll of gauze. Will’s knowledge of psychiatry and psychology is impressive. His is an unofficial Ph.D., earned through his experience with inept but licensed professionals, like Frederick Chilton. Will understands on an intuitive level more about the human psyche than many of his former colleagues.

“You know your way around psychology, Will. How do you find Jung’s approach?”

“Like all psychologists there’s always something of value in any approach. Depends on what the goal of the therapy is. In my case, it’s a welcome change from Skinner.”

“You’ve given up behaviorism?”

“Have you?”

Daniel wraps gauze around Hannibal’s legs as he watches Hannibal and Will exchange barbs and meaningful glances. He is reminded again of dinner at his house, mere hours ago, the two of them pricking each other and enjoying it immensely. He swallows down the bile of resentment and resumes with his dream analysis, hopeful that Hannibal will follow suit.

“In Jung’s concept of individuation, the ego communicates with the unconscious through archetypes. Hannibal’s constructive destruction bears some similarities with Jung’s ideas about the alchemy of transformation.”

“As does your therapy.” Hannibal says.

"Oh, we'll reserve rebuttal for another time. But, your awareness of Jungian psychology is evident in your hallucinating, however it got there."

"Your inferno walked right out of Dante's. His Divine Comedy is brimming with Jungian archetypes. You've made them your own." Hannibal says.

"The same could be said for your *Iliad.* Talk about archetypes. You introduced the narrative of the *Iliad,* used analogies to frame our discussions from the Bible to literature. And I've adapted the imagery, recycled it…"

"Cannibalized it." Hannibal says.

Daniel's fingers falter with the gauze and he swallows hard, looking to Will. Will's mouth is frozen in place; it thaws slowly into a grin that spreads across his lips despite himself.

"This…is why I dream I am in hell."

Daniel clears his throat, tosses Hannibal a reproachful look and continues with Will's train of thought.

"You've also adopted some of Jung's symbolism. It's how your subconscious is communicating with you."

"Your imagination is processing Jung's individuation." Hannibal adds.

"Seeking the philosopher's stone." Daniel says.

"Correct, and making an odyssey of it. Borrowing a blueprint from literature and imbuing it with your own archetypes. Along the way you encountered Persona, Shadow, and Anima, all pieces of Self, the supreme archetype."

"You've been interacting with multiple archetypes, Will. Your inferno and your other dream destinations are filled with representations of them." Daniel says.

"You think that I have aligned you and Hannibal with one of the aspects of Self?" Will says stifling a grunt. "Let me guess…"

"Not difficult to figure that out." Hannibal says, "Persona is the mask we wear for society. A part of us we cannot avoid. Jung took a rather dim view of Shadow."

"Shadow is the self we hide or are embarrassed about." Daniel says, "How is that dim?"

"Or not you?" Will adds with a smirk, enjoying the discussion more than he thought he would.

"His characterization is typically negative and grounded in society's expectations." Hannibal's tone is quite flat. "A maverick for his time, not for all time."

"Of course." Will says dryly, "Jung was part of the collective unconscious as much as the next guy, as conditioned to societal norms as anyone else. Not a fan of Nietzsche I'd imagine."

"I'd have thought you'd like being cast as the devil." Daniel says.

“I do.” Hannibal says. “It’s the character assassination I disapprove of. Jung’s ideas are provocative, however he was a product of his time. But you and I…”

Hannibal looks over his shoulder at Will, raises a brow.

“Chose exclusion. I know.” Will says softly as he passes the unused gauze to Hannibal to put back in Daniel’s bag.

“Archetypes can’t be ignored; they are a part of us. That much is true.” Daniel says.

“Very much so.” Hannibal agrees. “When a society undergoes transformation its archetypes change. Just as your archetypes have adapted to your transformation.”

“Engaging in a little self-discovery can be a good thing. The burden of the attending psychiatrist is to make sure the interaction between ego and the unconscious remains safe. I know some might find that inconvenient.” Daniel says, still arranging supplies and surgical instruments in his bag.

“One presupposes the ego is sufficiently strong to withstand the influence of Self.”

“The ego can easily succumb to the influence of Self if boundaries are lost.” Daniel counters.

“Boundaries are always negotiable.” Hannibal says.

“We’ve established Shadow.” Will says, “I think I get the picture without having to ascribe roles to each and every denizen of my underworld.”

Hannibal glances at the Burberry gracing his wrist once again. “We have time to debrief a little longer. I’m curious where your mythical therapist fits in.”

“If the line about *on gliding wings he takes up his mask* is an indication, I’d say Persona." Will says. “The connection to the real world, the personification of the self that still has to interact with society.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Hannibal says. “But, I can’t place it.”

“Neither can I.”

Will realizes he has been tracing circles over Hannibal’s bandaged shoulder. He abruptly stops and drops his hand. Hannibal may not have noticed loaded up on Lidocaine, but Daniel has. The emerald eyes bear the glint of amusement, if not reluctant indulgence. Will adjusts the towel hanging from his hips before it slips to the ground unsure how to take that.

“I um…well, rather my likeness tends to appear shortly before Will wakes up. Maybe that’s why he keeps going on about a dream within a dream. It’s a prompt.” Daniel suggests, watching Will fuss with his towel in blatant avoidance.

“I agree it’s a prompt. The line is a verse from a poem by that title by Edgar Allan Poe.” Hannibal says. “It is a lovely poem that distorts the line between dreams and reality; a commentary on the transitory nature of perception and the cognitive dissonance that occurs between the narrator’s sense of self and his crippled capacity for comprehension.”

“As a lit major I can appreciate all that, but it’s a lamentation about lost love using sand and sea as metaphors.” Daniel says, mildly irritated with Hannibal’s lengthy dissertation. “But, it’s how Will interprets it that matters."

Daniel looks to Will as does Hannibal.

"It's written in first person. I connected with the imagery of trying to hold the sand in my hand to keep just one grain from the sea. I…know what it's like to want to hold on to a singular moment, to wish to remain in it even though I know I can't stop time. Or the inevitability that someone else's thoughts will sweep it away."

Will sighs, slightly self-conscious about the sad confession that seems to have summoned a weighty and awkward silence. He thinks Hannibal will allow another few seconds of respectful reflection before he resumes his Jungian jaunt through psychotherapy. He does catch Daniel's eyes and a whiff of ocean breeze fills his nostrils or his mind, just like the reading of Poe's poem had always evoked impressions of surf. Will thinks sand and surf has come up frequently in his associations and hallucinations and decides therein must lie another correlation…with something.

"Cognitive dissonance as I said." Hannibal inspects Daniel's stitches as he speaks, sliding off the bumper to stand erect.

"I know when I am hallucinating or dreaming." Will says. "No cognitive dissonance there. The problem is that it all *feels* the same."

"Your odyssey occupies a great deal of your headspace. And your imagination encompasses all of your senses. Have you told me about all the characters that populate your inferno?"

"The main three you know. The beast, the angel, and the wolf. There is also the viper from time to time."

"Your Anima?"

"I don't think so." Daniel says. "The Anima is the self that does the communicating. The Persona functions as the shield and the anima is the self that completes the Self. It's the feminine aspect of a man's personality, the flip side of animus for a woman's personality."

"Jung's dated characterization. I'm surprised his interpretation is still applied." Hannibal says dismissively.

"Characterizing attributes as masculine or feminine is as old as the world." Daniel says, "It's gender based, but it has merit. I just ignore the labels."

"Then you ignore the primary archetype associated with Anima is your mother?"

"Stop." Will says. "Parents are off the discussion table. Period."

"Your mother is an absent figure in your childhood, Will. The most impressionable time of your life."

"I empathize with women all the time." Will insists.

Daniel taps loudly on the bumper before the discussion becomes too heated. Daniel is, however, gratified to see that some discord exists between Hannibal and Will. He considers the topics of childhood and parental absenteeism perhaps more germane to a discussion about their exclusionary and other…tendencies rather than Will's present dilemma. He can see their extant discussion digressing out of control if he allows it to continue. Hannibal is a veritable fountain of unsolicited information.

“Jung might have been a little obsessed with his mother, like Freud had his obsessions, and we can agree he was a product of his time and unevolved with his attitudes about women, but…” Daniel says, “Female archetypes do not have to appear in Will’s dreams or hallucinations for Anima to be present.”

“Agreed. If we accept that Will is on an odyssey of self-discovery, then his Anima is expressed in his actions. In his narrative, he does not have to rescue the archetypical maiden because he is not missing that part of himself.” Hannibal says. “But that does not discount the possibility of arrested development.”

Will’s mouth curves up in a reptilian smirk, “That damned clay. All Adam and no Eve. Tsk. Tsk. What is to be done about that?”

Hannibal chuckles. Will’s caustic sarcasm has been sorely missed. Contentment drips from Hannibal like honey.

Daniel cracks his neck, again resumes his train of thought, ever the pilgrim on the periphery.

“Will is like the hero archetype descending into his inferno to slay the beast.”

“He struggles with his fear and the beast, his Shadow self.” Hannibal says.

“Right. And he could either vanquish the beast or embrace it.” Daniel says.

“Conquer fate or accept it.” Will looks to Hannibal.

“But he doesn’t destroy the beast. He forgives the beast instead. Anima embodied in the act itself.” Daniel says.

“Exactly.” Hannibal says. “Which brings us to the realization of the true self. The goal of Jung’s individuation. And the Ouroboros in Will’s hallucination.”

“It’s the symbol for the assimilation of opposites.” Will says. “Creation and destruction. Rebirth. A short walk from our usual parlance.”

“And your mind differentiates between the snakes representing you and me, and the viper. The viper did not appear this time.”

“No. I consciously associate the viper with Du Maurier. We’ve both made that association.”

“Analysis of the viper will have to wait. The Ouroboros is an ancient symbol Jung adopts. It speaks specifically to the assimilation of the Shadow self. Will, you must have internalized the symbol. Events today and this evening influenced your dreamscape as did the corresponding emotions.”

“Makes sense to me though explaining it that way sort of diminishes the experience.”

Will bites his tongue, waits for Daniel to catch up and loosen his psychiatrist’s tie a little. Daniel rolls his eyes after a moment and grins.

“Your sense of humor continues to degrade, Will.”

“So why is my messenger, Daniel with the white wings, offering the Ouroboros to me?”

“He offered it from the other side of the stream, didn’t he?” Hannibal asks.

“The creature Hannibal…sorry, that’s what I call him.” Will says looking down at Hannibal.

“Understandable. He is…you. Continue.”

“He said, I said…” Will pauses, “whatever…a couple of things before the snakes swallowed each other. One was that I was still missing pieces…”

“What pieces?” Daniel says.

“That’s what I said. Hannibal, this...Hannibal..." Will points to Hannibal's head feeling vaguely foolish having to clarify which Hannibal he is referring to, "...brought up pieces, too."

“Perhaps Will is subconsciously consumed with his armor. Have you misplaced it already?” Hannibal asks smoothly, noting the scowl that paints itself across Daniel’s face.

“I don’t have it.” Daniel huffs.

“And the second thing...” Will’s voice cuts through the cold stare Daniel has leveled at Hannibal, “…was that I was incomplete.”

“That’s redundant.” Hannibal says.

"That's sort of the point. He mentioned it twice." Will says.

Daniel throws up his hands and walks a few paces from the trunk. He turns his back on Hannibal and Will and stares into the stream, shoulders rigid and arms crossed over his chest. Will looks to Hannibal, clears his throat and tugs at the towel, rolling the soft terry around his fingers as he speaks.

“Look, all this was masterful psychology, really. But…this is only one way to explain what is going on in my head. And as nicely as it all seems to fit, there are probably dozens of interpretations that could be applied.”

“Whatever is happening, is supposed to happen.” Hannibal says checking his watch again.

As his thumb glances over the watch face, he thinks of Du Maurier. Uncle Jack has likely received a phone call or two by now and Du Maurier has done her utmost to malign and otherwise undermine Hannibal at every turn. Uncle Jack will be circumspect about what he divulges and what he does not at this point. He has received his package from Hannibal by now, Tatiana delivered it herself. She also delivered Pazzi’s package and has been handling Du Maurier with kid gloves and a silver tongue. Tatiana has flawlessly executed each and every one of Hannibal’s directives and his largesse will reflect that.

Provided Jack has put his little envelope of clues together, he may show up at the Fiore estate before Du Maurier vacates it, but Hannibal doubts Jack will act quickly enough. Hannibal is confident that whatever Jack finds will keep him occupied, which is precisely what sending Lounds to Du Maurier was supposed to accomplish. Misdirection and ambiguity. Uncle Jack really should expect no less.

“Daniel.” Hannibal calls to the slender figure with the incredibly stiff back, “We have to leave. Perhaps you two can continue your dream analysis en route.”

Daniel turns from the stream, mouth hanging open. “You’re not still going? After what happened in the stream?”

“Will can multitask. He’s done it before.” Hannibal says dropping his towel and reaching for the fresh trousers laid out in the trunk.

Daniel stares at the towel on the ground, not sure if it’s impolite to look up while Hannibal pulls on his pants. He’s flustered and anxious and thinks maybe he should have a cigarette and calm down. Their discussion was especially draining, Daniel feels as wrung out as the towel at Hannibal’s bare feet.

He glances at Will’s feet, naturally parked right next to Hannibal’s. He winces as he observes the scuffs and scrapes on heels and toes, imagines the bottoms look even worse. His mind is like a roller coaster, whizzing along at high speed and his emotions are all over the place. Will’s feet are hardly a priority at the moment. He needs a time out before he drives the chariot into downtown Florence.

“Will?”

“Don’t forget about Luciano.” Will says leaning into the trunk. “What is it, Daniel?”

“Luciano?” Daniel rubs his face.

He puts his anxiety attack on hold in light of the new development that has sent dread bubbling up his esophagus and walks slowly to his car, hand in pocket fingering his keys.

“What are you going to do with the um…bags?”

Hannibal turns from the trunk; gestures inside at the zip lock bags containing Luciano’s frozen leftovers.

“A courtesy. You can’t very well dump the contents in your backyard, though your tomatoes suffer from too much lime and some organic decay would correct the soil’s pH balance. We’ll let Luciano nourish the soil here though I suspect the local wildlife will get first dibs.”

“Daniel…” Will begins, but Daniel waves him off.

“I’m going to get some air.” Daniel says.

Daniel’s hands find his face again and he closes his eyes, tries to remember where he left his cigarettes.

Hannibal watches Daniel walk around to front of the Mercedes and slip inside the passenger side to rummage through the glove compartment. He nudges Will with his shoulder. Will looks splendid in the royal blue terrycloth he holds about his waist. Unruly curls fall over his brow as he glances up at Hannibal from the trunk’s interior.

“Hmmmm? What?” Will asks.

“What were you holding on to them for? Certainly not to…ingest.” Hannibal actually wrinkles his nose.

“Of course not. A plan B. A frame. Insurance. I um…sort of forgot about them.” Will admits, voice dropping to a whisper.

“That was rude, Will.” Hannibal says. “Have a little empathy.”

Jack Crawford clenches his fist against the steering wheel as he guides the black Mercedes toward the fleet of firetrucks that surround what was Du Maurier’s residence at *Villa Fiore*. The cottage, bungalow, whatever it was is a pile of steamy rubble. He sniffs at the lapel of his damp blazer and figures the up side is he already smells of smoke.

He parks a ways away from the active firetrucks, pulling up next to the Fire Marshall’s vehicle. He slumps against the backseat and rolls his head over to look at Zeller. Zeller returns the tired gaze, shakes his head as he peers through the windshield.

“What a fucking mess.” Zee says.

“I should have seen something like this coming. Too easy. The entire conversation with her was too easy.”

Jack drags his bottle of tepid water from the console and takes a swig. He glances around to the backseat and is relieved Zeller brought the cooler from the trunk. He exchanges his bottle for a fresh one. He thinks how much he is going to hate getting out of the air conditioned car to walk around in the bracing heat. He feels a twinge of sympathy for the firemen in their heavy rubber and plastic.

“What did Signor Fiore say?”

“I talked to one of his assistants. *Signor* Fiore is on his way back here from some party a valley over. But, she’s been passing herself off as this Francesca Dumont since she arrived, I guess. Fiore’s daughter has been a patient for almost a year, so she jumped right in.”

“Did you tell them her real name?”

“We don’t even know if Du Maurier is her real name, but no. I did not. I showed her picture and got a truckload of pushing praise for *La Signorina* Dumont.”

“Where is her practice?”

“She apparently has a very private and very exclusive client base. Or patient base.”

“Doesn’t seem the kind of place she or Hannibal would live in.” Zee says.

Jack almost laughs as he looks around the narrow paved road and the cracked concrete driveways of the neighboring houses weaving through the trees. Very old world, very picturesque, but not private enough for Hannibal. As for Du Maurier, he thinks the view of the vineyard impressive, but imagines this was a merely a residence of convenience. Du Maurier did not spend a lot of time here until recently, after the daughter had some kind of melt down.

“Du Maurier made it clear they didn’t live together, but this was not her primary residence. The Fiore’s gift it to her as part of her retainer. Hannibal knew about it, doesn’t mean he was ever here.”

“What are they doing? Playing chicken with the FBI?” Zeller helps himself to a bottle of water.

“I don’t know yet. Let’s take a walk and find out what we can. Did you get a response from Lounds?”

“No. And it’s not like her not to bite. At least to send back a snarky remark.”

Jack nods and purses his lips. “And you know that from personal experience. That she usually bites.”

Zeller lifts his head slowly and turns to Jack, eyes wide, but he says nothing.

Jack smiles. “You don’t bite either, huh?”

Jack climbs out his side while Zee climbs out on the other side, dragging his laptop and gear with him. He sets the baggage down and stretches, cracks a back stiff from the long ride and from hunching over all day.

“Ugh. That smell…” Zee says.

“Yeah. Burnt body smell.” Jack agrees. “Well, Hannibal wanted us to find her. Maybe we have.”

“You think he set the fire?”

Jack shakes his head. “Inconsistent with his pathology as Will would say. But Hannibal is a different killer these days. Who knows? It would take a hell of a lot to surprise me these days.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 84
Daniel and Hannibal borrow very loosely from the Iliad Books IX, XVI, XVIII and XXII.
And that poison, that kiss a thousand times accursed! Arthur Rimbaud, Night in Hell

Coming up: Next stop is Palazzo Vecchio. Will and Daniel have some alone time en route while Hannibal rides on ahead. Pazzi gets a phone call from Jack, but will he pick up?

Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

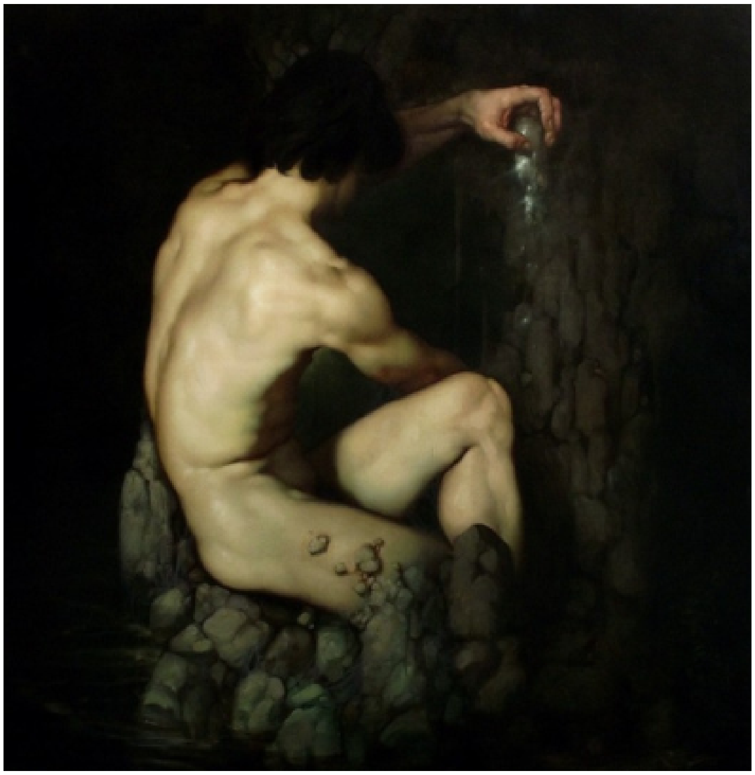
> Will and Daniel follow Hannibal to Florence, but take a little detour. Jack investigates the fire at Villa Fiore and calls Pazzi, but will he pick up?
>
> “My universe is going to get very small very soon.” Will says noting the sad glimmer in the green eyes stirring the dust of regret in his chest.
>
> “I don’t want to say goodbye, Will.” Daniel says, voice cracking.
>
> “This…”
>
> Will reaches across the console and pulls Daniel close nestling into the sturdy shoulder that has cradled his head and carried him more times than Will can count.
>
> “….this isn’t goodbye. This is advice.”
>
> “Advice?”
>
> “Cut a deal with Jack.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 85

Will and Daniel follow Hannibal to Florence, but take a little detour. Jack investigates the fire at Villa Fiore and calls Pazzi, but will he pick up?



Il Rifleso dell'Ombra, Roberto Ferri (Reflection of the Shadow)

A Dream Within a Dream

Take this kiss upon the brow! And, in parting from you now,

Thus much let me avow -- You are not wrong, who deem

That my days have been a dream; Yet if Hope has flown away

In a night, or in a day, In a vision, or in none,

Is it therefore the less gone? All that we see or seem

Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar Of a surf-tormented shore,

And I hold within my hand Grains of the golden sand --

How few! yet how they creep Through my fingers to the deep,

While I weep -- while I weep! O God! can I not grasp

Them with a tighter clasp? O God! can I not save

One from the pitiless wave? Is all that we see or seem

but a dream within a dream?

Edgar Allan Poe

The muffled rumble of the Mercedes joins the choir of insects, white noise for Will as he and Daniel cruise along the narrow road toward Florence. But for the moon and stars above and the occasional flicker of florescence from distant farmhouses they are very much alone on the back road and the darkness seems eternal to Will. They have been on these backroads forever it seems and Will would be tempted to ask if Daniel had gotten himself lost, however the taillight of Hannibal's Ducati bouncing in the distance says otherwise.

The windows are rolled up except for Daniel's and Will shifts in the leather seats enjoying the cool air that blasts from wide open vents. He touches his forefinger to the window, trailing the points of light in the sky as the Mercedes moves. He knows Daniel is collecting his thoughts as he drives, smoking and soaking up Will's emotions like a sponge.

The events of the last few hours have been saturated with the surreal. And that is saying something. Will is well acquainted with the surreal. He has been walking hand in hand with the surreal since Baltimore. Will thinks walking hand in hand with Hannibal might be more accurate. Or Fate. Will is still adjusting to this new dynamic, this…revealing of selves. Being with Hannibal has never been dull; but being *with* Hannibal has been one nerve jangling moment after another; violent and intimate and so…fulfilling. Will wants more. More of this indescribable sense of power and freedom. More of Hannibal.

I have never felt more alive than when I am with you.

How much more depends on what happens at Palazzo Vecchio and if Will can hold it together. Will's ball of yarn continues to unravel. Daniel may be having an especially tough time processing through all the tumult he must be feeling as the strands of yarn blow through Will's skull. Will thinks it no small wonder Daniel hasn't turned on the music like he usually does. Daniel is swimming in emotions, too; his own and Will's and yet his mist suffuses the cabin of the car with ocean scented calm. Like a fist, Will's chest cinches with affection, warm and sweet.

Engrossed with disentangling the strands of yarn unraveling in his head, Will's fingers idly play about the high collar abrading his neck, the fabric toughened from too much bleach and industrial detergent. Thankfully, his coarse costume for the evening rides on top of the attire Daniel brought for him to wear, another well-tailored ensemble that fits Will like a glove, a layer of insulation beneath the layer of deception.

There is no insulating Daniel however. The emotional tide ebbs and flows freely as ever. Ship to anchor. Daniel's feelings are compounded by Will's and he is influenced by them. The shield Daniel has lain down for Will has not been picked up again. Whether or not this is a natural consequence of intimacy is anyone's guess, but Will thinks Daniel doesn't want to pick up his shield. Will has an idea where empathy like Daniel's can lead. He's been affected by Will enough as it is. For this reason, Will knows he has to sever the tether but he can't simply drop his faithful anchor anywhere; he has to find a safe port.

He glances down remembering an especially mischievous twinkle in a pair of dark luminous eyes as he had pulled on the cumbersome beige custodial uniform Hannibal had handed him, immediately understanding the ploy; the ruse a modern equivalent of the heralded hoax of Greek myth excepting the horse is constructed of cotton instead of wood. For this final assault on their enemy they are not armed with cuirass and spear, but with implements much less innocuous.

We're going to enter the palazzo as janitors?

Custodial staff. No one pays attention to them, and the senior staff always carries master keys to the museum's multiple entrances.

That's an RFID card you've got there. They likely changed the passcode once the Polizia alerted the Uffizi to Victor Boucher.

It's a master key; impervious to passcode changes, aren't they? The passcodes are rotated with some frequency for security and I observed the head custodians never received new key cards. The museum is concerned about theft. Victor Boucher did not steal anything.

You pinched this.

It's a clone.

I'm not going to ask how you appropriated it or how you're so sure the owner of the original never noticed it was missing. This one works?

I have no reason to believe it won't.

Don't tell me…you've never tried it. Your arrogance surfaces at the most inopportune moments.

Arrogance tends to float upon a sea of confidence. Perhaps you should steer your little boat there.

Hannibal's *Iliad* continues. Will had listened to Hannibal without further interruption as they had prepared to breach the walls of Florence's most famous medieval fortress. The last of the evening tours are finished up at this late hour, though Hannibal had explained private tours are granted from time to time and the Uffizi and its numerous galleries are never entirely vacant. Security personnel, curators, and various staff frequently work when the museum is closed. Including a vetted janitorial staff. The RFID key is also required to access locked doors within the palazzo. There are rooms off-limits to tour groups, pretty much the entire first floor with the exception of the grand audience hall and there are secret passages throughout the old Medici palace, passages not included on any tour.

In a gratuitous gesture Will is certain only deepened Daniel's dismay at turning the Medici palace into a crime scene, Hannibal had retrieved a large roll of paper from the depths of one of the duffle bags in the trunk. He had presented it to Will and Daniel, slipping off the rubber bands with his usual flair and had spread its curled edges out along the roof of the Mercedes. Daniel had stared dumbstruck as Hannibal had unveiled a floor plan of the Palazzo Vecchio.

Will had not been surprised at Hannibal's meticulousness but he had been a little awed that Hannibal had drawn the decorous and detailed map himself. He had imagined Hannibal bent over his work desk at his villa in Impruneta with a ruler and compass patiently shaving wood from his pencils with painstaking exactitude. An activity Will had seen him similarly engaged so many times at his office or seated behind the ornate desk in the salon. One particular occasion, shortly after Mason had joined Hannibal's select cadre of patients, had tumbled from his ball of yarn.

Will had been looking over Hannibal's shoulder as he had leaned across his desk, clearing away his freshly sharpened pencils in preparation for Will's evening session. Will was always on time, perfectly on time and yet Hannibal had left the unfinished charcoal squarely in the middle of the desk. The transparent solicitation had not gone unnoticed. Will had politely paid his respects with unfeigned sincerity.

I've never seen a church or um…basilica like that. It's beautiful. Where is it?

The Cappella Palantina in Palermo. A medieval chapel built for the Norman kings of Sicily, Byzantine architecture. East meets west. This…is essentially just an outline. To recreate the detail will require much more time.

And a lot more pencils. Wood and graphite dull a scalpel quickly, don't they?

Very quickly. Every creative act does have its destructive consequence.

And the shavings that fall onto the paper? Collateral damage for the cost of creation?

There is always collateral damage. The pencil is a tool of creation, destroyed in the process, but its essence preserved in the finished piece.

How many pencils and scalpels will be destroyed in the process?

As many as are necessary.

Will thinks Hannibal may not have had time to finish his chapel. Hannibal had made more than this one reference to the Cappella Palatina in the days that had followed; he had made a mention of the famous Norman chapel and its Byzantine mosaics while they had been cleaning out his office. Will shakes his head unable to draw a line between the drawing and conversation in Baltimore with recent events. But the pointed allusions to creation and destruction linger. His mind wanders along the strands until he finds the strand of himself looking at Hannibal's map of Palazzo Vecchio again.

The map had been frame worthy, an homage to Renaissance style and replete with handwritten notes around the margins representing plenty of collateral in the guise of graphite and wood. It is because the map is directly relevant that Hannibal had brought it with him, otherwise it too would have been left behind in Impruneta to be sealed in plastic and cataloged by FBI. Knowing Will had never stepped foot inside, Hannibal had shown his detailed map to Will, assured it would be recreated in Will's imagination with likely stunning verisimilitude.

Palazzo Vecchio had been the seat of Florence's government, originally a public building; its archways on the rusticated ground floor had once been open so the people of Florence could enjoy Michelozzo's arcaded courtyard inside after they had waited their turn, inching their bottoms along the stone bench wrapped around the palace's exterior. The archways are now filled in; Michelangelo had designed the windows in each archway decades later, to accommodate a less trusting generation of Medici patrons. Secret stairways and hallways run throughout the structure so the Medici could walk around their palace unnoticed in complete privacy, just like the Vasari Corridor had permitted them to secretly cross the city and the Arno to the Palazzo Pitti and its gardens, their later residence. Hannibal, ever curious about the hidden nature of anything must have been fascinated by clandestine passages and rooms seamlessly built into the design, the perceived space an illusion when compared to an actual blueprint.

At any rate, custodians with ladders, tarp, and toolboxes won't be accosted by security. There is apparently a new exhibit under construction as luck, or Hannibal would have it. Will is not unduly anxious, rather he feels a sense of urgency, a need to conclude this particular act and turn the page. He's not sure if it's a page from Hannibal's *Iliad* or his own Jungian *Odyssey* that feeds his instincts and he muses on the possibility that his inner narratives might somehow end up in the same place. Narratives within narratives and dreams within dreams, all tributaries flowing toward the same mysterious sea.

All we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.

Poe's poem of impermanence and Winged Daniel's repetition of its refrain continues to perplex and Will retreats deep into his memory palace. The persistence of his hallucinations and the frequency with which his mind vacillates between his dreams and his waking world means something. Will accepts the madness; he needs to see the message within it. He needs to see the identity of its messenger, see beneath the pearly white wings and Daniel's face.

Will's affinity with Poe's dark prose drips into the pool of childhood and winged Daniel's words send images of sand sifting through his fingers at the shore as he had filled up empty soda cans to cart home and of catching snowflakes on his mittens then rushing into the house to stick the snow speckled mittens in the freezer only to wake up the next morning to find the mittens rigid as boards, his frozen treasures absorbed by the wool.

Can I not save one from the pitiless wave? Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream?

As his finger trails along the windshield Will closes his eyes and thinks of touching another pane of glass one late winter evening in Baltimore, long after he should have been home in Wolf Trap. He had been thinking of the poem that evening and he drifts into the memory of that conversation. He is suddenly standing before the huge French windows of Hannibal's salon, staring at the frosted designs shimmering across the frozen glass caught in the lamplight streaming in from outside.

Satie's *Trois Gnossiennes* had been playing; the stark piano notes had simply flowed without any apparent structure as far as Will could tell and Will had enjoyed Satie's wandering piece immensely the first time Hannibal had introduced it. He thinks Hannibal had selected Satie especially for him thereafter, as enrapt watching Will listen as Will had sat enrapt listening.

How long have I been standing here?

Will had turned from the window, his inquiry one of curiosity, not concern. Hannibal had always indulged Will's long silences, allowing him his space content with his company. Will had imagined then that Hannibal's immense ego had been fed by his willing captive's prolonged presence in his home and Will's desire for a reckoning had been stoked, his own ego stroked with the apparent spell his physical form had seemed to cast and so, he had continued to consent to being the irresistible bait he had agreed to be. Or so, he had thought.

Will had known that his presence had evoked a powerful emotional response in Hannibal. He knows now what that powerful emotion was. Absence apparently does make the heart grow fonder.

The easing of Hannibal's loneliness in his presence seems so obvious in retrospect, but at the time, Will had imagined Hannibal's tacit encouragement of his unsociable tendencies more manifestations of persuasion and seduction. Hannibal rarely ever suggested he should go home, the invitation to stay always open, excepting when Will's stubbornness became inconvenient. On those occasions, Hannibal had engaged in his special brand of behaviorism, becoming as distant and cold as the Baltimore wind outside.

Persuasion and seduction were certainly part of Hannibal's approach with him and he had exploited Will's susceptibility often, especially with Jack, a means to an end. When Will's long silences broke there were always the philosophical debates designed to achieve that end. Will realizes now that Hannibal had enjoyed their debates, not simply as a means to an end, but Hannibal had viewed their fractious conversations as friendship.

Hannibal had looked up from his book, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, light reading for Hannibal, and had closed it on his thumb eschewing the ribbon trailing from the leather bound volume for the moment as he had assessed Will's attention span from the seat of his crushed velveteen chair.

You've been at the window the better part of Book V I think. Contemplating the nature of things?

How could you tell?

Will had let his hand fall away from the frosty pane to crawl into his trouser pocket, fingertips still chilled. His pool of impermanence had spread to the present and Will had found himself puzzling over things lost in the pursuit of his reckoning.

Hannibal's thumb had likewise slipped from his book and he had smoothed the satin strand along its thin pages, closed it and set it aside. After glancing at its cover for a moment he had looked up at Will standing by the drapes.

A matter of deduction. It's dark outside. You weren't staring at your reflection all this time. Your finger followed the frost on the pane. What did you see?

A moment in time. Will had said, thinking of Poe and mittens and snowflakes; everything he had believed about himself slipping away like those golden grains of sand in the surf. Will had felt the rushing of waves all around him as he had stood, hands in pockets facing Hannibal.

Reflections of that moment in every moment thereafter, but never that moment again. Will had said.

The transitory nature of life; our linear existence.

One of those things we cannot change.

Will had said, always anticipating Hannibal's tendency to link their conversations to the topic of his transformation no matter how tangential. He swears Hannibal had been able to anticipate his anticipation. He always had a ready answer for everything.

Or keep… Will had added as the last note of the haunting melody had faded.

You can. Hannibal had quickly countered.

I can?

Will had chuckled softly at the suggestion and at the disarmingly affectionate smile from Hannibal.

The passage of time is an experience of emotion. Happy moments never last long; anguish seems interminable. Emotions like memory fade. But you…can recreate an experience, or create someone else's, emotions intact. Exist in a dream as it were.

No one can exist in a dream. Not without being psychotic.

Isn't that what you do? You've been sampling other people's identities all your life. Hannibal's eyes had rolled to the ice framed windows and back to Will's face. *You were holding on to a dream just now. You still grieve for what has been lost?*

So many casualties in my…becoming.

Blood and breath.

Not…the body count. Other casualties. I think virtue among them.

Will had nodded at the slim volume on the end table. Hannibal had drawn a finger down the length of the binder and with his eyes had gestured toward the regal Cabriole sofa. *Gymnopèdies No* 1 had softly rolled from the speakers as Will had taken his indicated seat and had waited for Hannibal to get around to pouring him a glass of the heady Mouton Rothschild Bordeaux already opened; Hannibal's long stemmed glass nearly empty resting upon a marble coaster next to his book.

Virtue is a value perceived through a subjective lens. Hannibal had said. *A very narrow lens if you refer to a Stoic interpretation.*

And…as a value it can be defined by the absence of its opposite. In this case that would be vice.

Will had watched Hannibal retrieve a wine glass from the curio, eyes drifting about the salon in search of Will's discarded tumbler of whiskey. Hannibal had commented that Will's tumblers had taken to turning up in odd places but forgetfulness could be forgiven, once perhaps twice. Will had been forgetful again that evening and he had watched the dark eyes wander about the various ledges and shelves where an errant whiskey tumbler without a coaster might be.

A crisp line had crept along the thin lips as Hannibal's gaze had halted at the bronze statue of Julius Caesar in the shadowy corner on the far side of the window where Will had been standing. The replica had been a gift from an acquaintance, another patron of the arts; this particular patron affiliated with the MET in New York. Hannibal had apparently been somewhat at a loss as to where to put the bronze replica and had placed it in the salon while contemplating the spatial dilemma its arrival had posed.

Will had also contemplated a spatial dilemma earlier. Having finished his drink and deciding that the harpsichord had borne the bottom of his tumbler too many times, he had impulsively deposited his spent glass in the outstretched hand of Rome's famed statesman. The fact that Caesar was known for his abstinence had further delighted and so Will had let the tumbler stay precariously balanced though it was.

Hannibal's impassive gaze had drifted from the bronze to Will. Will had matched the gaze with one of his own, eyebrows raised and chin tilted up. Blonde brows had folded in resignation and without another glance at Caesar Hannibal had graciously handed Will the fine crystal and poured the Bordeaux. As Hannibal had deftly turned the bottle with the last drop their eyes had met and molecules had crackled like the charged air before a storm.

You believe who you were yesterday was brimming with virtue and who you are becoming is not? Petty vices notwithstanding, of course. Hannibal had said, crossing to his seat. *How does that make you feel?*

I don't feel virtuous. Will had said, managing to keep his eyes from the statue.

And how did it feel before?

Hannibal had topped off his wine and sunk into the velveteen Bergère easing into its serpentine back, dark eyes peering over the rim of his glass.

I suppose it would be more accurate to say I felt contentment in the pursuit of virtue.

You feel discontent because the nature of your pursuit has changed or because the nature of the thing you pursue has changed?

I'm not sure. Will had said.

Aside from Will's extant pursuit of Hannibal, Margot had introduced herself on his doorstep a couple weeks ago and their commiseration had signaled to Will that Hannibal had found another damaged patient with which to play God. Will had found himself considering Margot as possible leverage, perhaps a useful pawn after they had swapped secret confessions uttered from their respective patient's chairs. Will had swapped spit with her only days before. Will had perpetrated Freddie Lounds' fiery demise on Hannibal this same week. Will had been throwing down a lot of virtues lately.

Lost your moral high ground, haven't you?

No more pointing fingers at you without pointing them at myself.

Then, what you feel is the absence of certitude. Your eyes have been opened. Concepts, like your design, are evolving. The physical structures of your brain continue to be affected by the choices you make.

Killing has changed the way I think, but the physical structures of the universe remain.

Virtue is not a physical thing.

Hannibal had paused to dip his nose into his glass as though truth floated upon the wine and he could somehow smell it.

Not…according to Marcus Aurelius. Virtue was an actual component of the universe and it was in everything, at least according to Stoicism. He was a Stoic, wasn't he?

Generally speaking, but he was not a slave to the philosophy. He conceived intellectual pursuits as the means to achieve virtue thus serving the divine spirit immanent in all things. Hannibal had said.

Stoics saw a universe full of form and substance believing all of it infused with a divine spirit. The antithesis of Plato's shadows in the cave. They held virtue like a divine spark. They called it the ruling principle.

Will had mentally queued up a paper he had written for an undergraduate philosophy class hoping he'd remember enough form and substance to engage Hannibal.

They endeavored to live in accordance with nature. But first, they had to define nature. Hannibal had said.

To live with nature one must know the nature of nature.

Will had tipped his glass toward Hannibal in silent acknowledgement of Hannibal's second favorite topic of discussion; the nature of things. Will, naturally, was his most favorite topic of all and the course of conversation would invariably sweep Will along its circuitous currents.

Yes. Stoic philosophy bloomed for that purpose. Their philosophical inquiry led to the idea that nature consists of that divine spark, its purpose to promote the common good. Hannibal had said.

The common good of all things, whether animate or inanimate. Lightening or the human soul. They named their God virtue and the rest of the gods became…manifestations. Will had added.

Stoicism appealed to Roman values like moderation. It was a highly individual religion and quite popular. I wasn't aware you were versed in its esoteric philosophy.

Hannibal had lifted his glass in a friendly toast. Will still isn't sure that the gesture and the tone had not been slightly disingenuous. Will had quickly decided self-deprecation the way to go.

I'm not. Required reading in college. Will had answered with a dismissive wave of his glass. *I do know that Stoicism can be distilled into a choice between two opposing attributes. Virtue is good; vice is bad. There was a collective understanding of what constituted virtue or vice. For the Stoics, neither was open to interpretation or negotiation. People had a duty to strive toward goodness. To be one with nature…or God.*

You are equating Roman virtue and vice with Christian good and evil. Small wonder you despair. The Stoics were pantheists, not monotheists. Aurelius himself despised Christians. How virtuous is that?

Virtue is the absence of vice; it is expressed subjectively. Will had reluctantly conceded, annoyed that he had agreed with Hannibal, even a little as the words had flown from his mouth.

Then we concur. Virtue is a concept expressed subjectively by the society that defines it. The soul of man is part of the Stoic's universe and as such he should aspire to always act in the common good. This presupposes of course that the nature of the universe is a single unifying force of common good, the ruling principle from which all things flow.

In other words, to be like God.

Virtue is always associated with the deity man aspires to emulate. Whether thrown up in the sky as a laissez-faire force of nature or thrown up on a cross as a martyr for sins.

Hannibal's lips had puckered and Will had wondered if the cause had been the tartness of the tannins or the sourness of the oblique reference to the Savior staining his tongue.

Do you read Marcus Aurelius for inspiration or because you enjoy poking holes in his philosophy?

I admire the man. His Meditations were more a diary, never intended for publication and I find his admissions uncharacteristically candid for an emperor. Aurelius viewed his shortcomings with typical Roman severity and since he was not afflicted with Christianity, was immune from the self-contempt he would have otherwise heaped upon himself for his perceived inadequacies.

You are similarly immune. Will had pointed out, uncrossing his legs and relaxing into the curved back of the serpentine sofa.

So is God and are we not created in his image? I have no inadequacies perceived or otherwise from which to be absolved. And neither do you. Aurelius wrote that every living organism is fulfilled when it follows the right path for its own nature.

Being one with your nature does not mean giving in to your nature. That is the point.

The point is you were never virtuous by your own definition, let alone Marcus Aurelius' definition. Virtue is measured by one's actions. Actions proceed from thought. Thought issues from Self, the conscious and the unconscious.

My discontent remains. Will had held his wine glass to his nose waiting for another volley. Hannibal typically had not disappointed.

It's not virtue you have lost. Hannibal had smacked his lips proffering his signature smug smirk that still drives Will nuts. *You grieve for your perceived lost innocence.*

Perceived? Please… You took that from me, enjoyed taking it.

Will had taken a sip of wine, rolled it carefully around his mouth allowing the tartness to draw the sour taste now twisting his lips. It was a matter of fact and he had wanted Hannibal to admit it there, in the sanctuary of the salon. But, Hannibal had lifted up his wine glass shaking his head.

Innocence you laid out for the taking after Hobbs robbed you of your virginity. The innocence I took was illusory, but felt real to you nonetheless.

You took nothing I was not prepared to give. Will had said, jaws too tight to even entertain a sip of wine.

A cub does not know it is a predator until that first hunt.

So you took it upon yourself to pop my delusional cherry.

Yes. An entire pie of…cherries.

Heat had spread along his neck and beneath his shirt. Will had been certain his ears had reddened but Hannibal had made no mention of Will's obvious discomfort, had merely sat in his chair eyes riveted to Will's. Will had cleared his throat in an effort to deflect and resume a confection free discussion. Feeling a trifle buzzed, and restless with Hannibal's miniature soliloquies, Will had set down his glass fingers tracing the elegant curve of the generous bowl.

Either way, virtue remains an aspiration of any society. I find nothing virtuous about killing.

Hannibal had nodded with his own peculiar gravitas, setting down his wine as well.

You enjoy it.

Doesn't matter that I enjoy it. That's not enough.

And you require everything you enjoy to be virtuous?

Of course not. Obviously, not. Will had said glancing at his wine. *But how does one reconcile the pursuit of virtue with an act bereft of it?*

Does one actually acquire virtue if the pursuit is bereft of it?

Will had taken a long meditative drink from his glass as his eyes had locked with Hannibal's over the rim. He had set the crystal down slowly, taking care to place it in the center of the marble coaster.

The ends justifies the means.

Spoken like a god. Or an FBI agent. Virtue is a blanket religion pulls over its head, keeps it warm and cozy. Collective values can lead to killing. Crusades. Jihad. Every Roman soldier who ever lived believed his service virtuous.

God rewards virtue.

Does he? The Christian believes He does. So does the Muslim. Rewards waiting in heaven for righteousness and virtue. The Stoic believed everyone was absorbed into the cosmos regardless. For them, seeking virtue was a personal and mortal choice. Which is more virtuous?

Then, an action is not virtuous in and of itself; it's a matter of perception. Will had said seeking clarification and receiving it with a self-satisfied nod.

When God drops church roofs on the parishioners, is that virtuous? Hannibal had asked.

I don't know. But He must enjoy it because He does it all the time.

Will had said fiddling with his glass as Hannibal had risen from his velveteen chair to stand beside him.

When you killed Hobbs, you considered it a righteous kill. But you enjoyed it. Because you enjoyed it; you found no virtue in the act. You killed Tier, another righteous kill and you enjoyed that, too.

Hannibal's hands had found his face and drawn Will's gaze up with a touch of his thumb beneath Will's chin. Will had grasped the arms of the chair and pushed himself up to meet Hannibal eyes.

So, it's the enjoyment I find bereft of virtue, not the killing.

Will had looked into the dark eyes and had found approval, effusive and shameless so that Will had to drop his gaze for the hot wire threading through him. Hannibal had inclined his head so that the smooth lips traced along the tip of Will's nose, the stain of wine so tantalizingly wet Will had breathed ripe berries. The scent of sandalwood and spiced leather wafting from the unbuttoned shirt had been intoxicating and Will had tilted his head back inviting Hannibal's lips to trade his nose for his mouth.

But the lips had lingered at his nose and then had brushed warm across his cheek as his hand had grasped a slender hip only to drop lower along the pleats of his trousers, each caress more insistent than the last.

And since you do not require everything you enjoy to be virtuous…

Hannibal's lips had hovered over his own and Will had looked up into those luminous dark eyes suddenly sucking in wine soaked breath as warm fingers had unzipped his trousers and slipped inside.

Practicing your Sophist sleight of hand? Will had asked as he had popped the button on his trousers for easier access.

Was that a pun, Will?

Hannibal's fingers had curled behind his ear in that familiar way he had twining through the thick curls there. Will had opened his mouth and had drawn Hannibal's teasing tongue inside. The kiss had been nerve shattering and deep, nothing slight about it. When Hannibal had at last pulled back to look at Will, as he frequently did after kissing him, he had taken a finger across Will's slick lips and raised a blonde brow.

My mistake. Not a pun. Just a slip of the tongue.

Yours or mine? Are you implying my unconscious um…slips out frequently?

Not often enough, rather you slip into it frequently. Hannibal had said, fingers stroking hardened flesh and nose drifting into Will's sandalwood scented hair.

Another blissful stolen moment of bodies pressed together and then Hannibal had eased away, running fingers once more through Will's hair before walking over to the window.

You look at the crystals of ice and wonder at their beauty all the while knowing it is their nature to melt. Death, whether figurative or literal, is often necessary for change.

Hannibal had pressed his hand against the glass until the crystals shimmered translucent in the light and began to slide down the thin antique pane, sophistry intact substituting conduction for alchemy. But, Will had recognized the genuineness prompting Hannibal's demonstration, after all it had been Will who had introduced the metaphor and Will had understood that Hannibal had intended no deception.

It will snow again. Will had said, walking over to join Hannibal at the window. *Rebirth. Transformation.*

To truly discover your nature Will, you must become intimate with your instincts.

"Will?"

Will had stared at Hannibal's hand splayed across the glass for a long moment thinking how infrequently they stood side by side, almost always preferring to position themselves across from each other. He had rubbed his hands together until the friction had pleasantly warmed his skin and had pressed his hand alongside Hannibal's.

Life is neither good, nor evil, but only a place for good and evil. Hannibal had said.

Quoting Mephistopheles?

Tsk. Tsk. Marcus Aurelius. Sometimes, Will, it is the pursuit that changes us. I'll get the lights. Time for bed. And don't…forget your glass.

"Will. I'm going to touch your hand on the glass. Don't freak."

Will blinks as his eyes adjust to the dim lighting of the dashboard. He lets Daniel guide his hand from the windshield to rest in his lap. He looks into the patient green eyes wondering if his retreat had remained in his head.

"You were drifting again." Daniels says eyes darting between Will and the windshield.

"I'm here." Will says as Daniel's hand withdraws to rest upon the steering wheel.

"You don't really know how this is going to play out with Pazzi, do you?" Daniel says pulling a cigarette out of the pack with his teeth.

Will wonders if the cigarette is prompted by need or unconscious association. There seems to be a lot of that going around.

"No." Will says tugging at his collar, "But, I have a pretty good idea. Hannibal is playing chess and he prepares for a long game. As he said, there is risk. He enjoys the thrill. He especially enjoys springing surprises on me."

"To see what you will do."

"Curiosity. Sometimes, Hannibal plays just to play."

When you find what you seek, you will thrill to it. And you will hate yourself for wanting the thrill. But that is who you are.

I know who I am, Daniel.

Yes, I think you do. You already have all your answers in your head. You always have.

Daniel considers Will has adapted, evolved and become. The change he feels in Will does not blare through his senses like the roar of a train but it is there, faint chimes in a breeze that ripples cold over his skin. It is not only Hannibal who likes to play. The predator Daniel had felt lurking behind the unkempt curls and black framed glasses during their initial encounter in his office looks at him now in the seat beside him unapologetic and unashamed. The wound and the weight are absent; the pale blue pools shimmer with the thrill of the hunt. The anticipation is palatable a visceral mouth-watering excitement that quivers on Daniel's tongue.

He takes a long drag of his cigarette, thoughts and the moment somehow suspended with the exhale of smoke out the open window. Will is crazy and he doesn't even know how crazy he is. Daniel thinks a reassessment of his own sanity might prove more than a little disturbing at this point. His tongue plays about his lips as he considers how to best approach the topics he wants to discuss before they reach Florence.

"You don't need to know what he has planned. This is…fun for you, too. You trust him."

"I trust he doesn't want us locked up or caught. That may very well happen, but that's not really the point is it?"

"You're hunting together. Achilles and Patroclus pulling on their armor again." Daniel says hoping Will is wearing whatever armor it is Hannibal wants him to wear.

“Yes.”

Daniel shifts gears as they cruise along following the dim red flicker of the Ducati’s tail lights shining in the distance. Will glances at his anchor beside him. Daniel blows smoke out the window, cigarette pinched between thumb and forefinger as he guides the Mercedes away from the charred remains of the slaughter house, the smoky debris unfurling along the sky obscuring the stars behind them. He restively licks his lips in between drags, teeth plucking at the bottom lip, deep in thought. When he is finished with his cigarette, he will start digging around in the console for his chap stick. Will thinks he knows Daniel’s habits as well as his own and again affection tightens like a fist as though Daniel had leaned across the console and touched his lips to Will’s chest.

The sense that Daniel sits beside him contemplating that very thing slinks through Will’s consciousness as he looks out the window. Daniel has proven himself resilient and despite suffering through the appetizers he’s been served, he continues to have an appetite accepting plate after plate of Will’s banquet of crazy with a modicum of indigestion. Will considers that after patching up Hannibal, matching wits with him down at the stream, and holding his own in Hannibal’s psychiatric arena, Daniel’s nerves are frayed and in need of soothing. He glances at the stiff shoulders and shifting lips, the silky crown of curls framing the pensive face Will observes in profile. Ever considerate of Will’s sensitivity, Daniel stares through the windshield granting Will the illusion of privacy in the close confines of the car.

The impulse to touch him and be touched erupts like a split seam and as Daniel flicks the cigarette into the wind his other hand reaching for the console, Will acts on his impulse.

“What?” Daniel says turning from the windshield pleasantly surprised as Will grips his fingers.

Will glances at the rolling Tuscan countryside, its black fields sweep by like dark waves in the night. He watches Hannibal’s Ducati crest the hill well ahead of them and a wry grin surfaces as the tail light becomes part of the low hanging constellation in the southern sky. Aquila hovers above the hill and Will allows Zeus’ eagle to fly on ahead while he tends to his anchor.

“Want to pull over for a minute?” Will looks into the wide green eyes.

“Sure…okay.” Daniel says, uncertain of the reason but trusting Will has one as the Ducati disappears from view. “Hannibal won’t um…mind?”

“Mind? No. Likely anticipated as much. I’m sure he has things to do. Hannibal tells me what he thinks I need to know.” Will offers a sidelong glance and a tight tease of a smile. “I do the same with him.”

“You didn’t disclose everything about your hallucination, did you?” Daniel says, looking for a spot to pull over.

“No.” Will sighs and bites his lip, raises his brows. “And you didn’t disclose everything you were thinking, either.”

“Sins of omission already? Not a promising start for a budding relationship.” Daniel retorts.

“Hardly budding.” Will says quietly hoping to soothe some of the sting he detects in Daniel’s tone. “Evolving. It’s a rough sea and...”

“You still need your anchor.” Daniel says as he guides the Mercedes off road, shuts off the ignition.

“Well, your anchor has some advice, but I know you’re not going to take it.”

“You didn’t take mine.” Will says.

“Damned if I do, damned if I don’t. The advice is don’t do this. Don’t go after Pazzi. You’re still having hallucinations and blackouts and you can’t control them. You’ve been drifting in the car.”

“I know.”

“No. I don’t think you do.” Daniel says leaning close so he can nuzzle Will’s nose. “I’ve been talking to you and you haven’t heard me at all.”

“Just now? You were asking about Pazzi…”

“No. Before you plastered your fingers to the windshield.”

Daniel allows the shock to pass from Will’s face. They haven’t been on the road long at all but Will had slunk down in his seat almost immediately, head resting against the window his eyes as glazed as donuts. Daniel does not know what to make of it, but the implications are disturbing.

“What were you talking about?”

“Du Maurier and Lounds. Maybe your mind needed to switch off. Maybe the sound of my voice put you to sleep…”

“Nice try, but no.” Will says, face grim. “Something else is going on. And I’d like to figure it out before Hannibal does.”

“Don’t you think you should tell him?”

Daniel thinks minimizing the potential hazards of blackouts and seizures whilst tripping about the palazzo and ripping out someone’s entrails might be of interest to Hannibal and it should be important to Will.

“He has some idea. It’ll make things interesting.”

“Will…”

“I think taking out the trash at the palazzo will keep me awake.”

“You think. Jesus fuck…Look, I know you don’t buy into the Jungian explanation, but something is keeping you in this inferno of yours.”

“All the more reason to pick my brain, don’t you agree?” Will says, “Hannibal is not as versed in my inferno as you are.”

“Well, tell me what you left out and I’ll tell you how it fits with what I’m thinking.”

What are you hiding from me, Will?

I revealed myself to you.

Not all. You’re still missing pieces of yourself and I would have them all.

What pieces? Where?

Where did you enter the Gates of Hell and descend into your inferno?

Daniel considers the phrasing. Location is strongly suggested, but the creature's answer was prompted by Will's question. It's Will's inferno and he determines its design, even to the construction of conversation. His subconscious is still trying to talk to him and that is a good sign.

"Hannibal has been telling you you're missing pieces for a while."

"He said that when he tried to convince me I had killed all those girls."

"Do you agree?"

"Then? Or now?"

"If you have to ask…" Daniel asks aware he has struck a nerve or a memory and either potentially productive.

"You said you imagined shooting the Ravenstag on your front porch with Hobbs. The stag bled out on the floor with you. Separation. But the stag followed you here. At some point your dreams changed from Ravenstag to serpent tailed eagle."

"Leda and the swan. A manifestation of Zeus. I associate the eagle with Hannibal, with Zeus…with God." Will rolls his eyes knowing how crazy he sounds.

"The associations go deeper than that. Eagles and eagle feathers have been showing up everywhere."

"And in Hannibal's drawings." Will says, "But I didn't see the recent drawings until I went to his villa in Impruneta."

"He identifies with Zeus and the eagle, too. Left eagle feathers on you at Boboli. It's all tied together, Will."

Will sighs. He gave Hannibal his infernal form. He has plummeted to the depths of hell and soared over an endless blue sea above a fleet of Greek triremes with him, a naked Ganymede ascending to Olympus. Except Zeus' pet had gotten pissy and dropped him. The eagle feathers Hannibal had placed on him at Boboli helped him sell Prometheus to Jack. He was Adam looking for the tree of knowledge and the key to release him from the chains. Associations come quickly. In that moment he had been Adam…

In this moment, I am aware that either version of my tableau is possible.

Both are possible. But only one of them is true.

In that moment… In another moment, had there been another truth concealed beneath? Another allusion Will had missed?

"Anything else?" Daniel says shaking Will from his thoughts so he has to shift gears back to the present and his debriefing with Daniel.

See? On gliding wings he takes up his mask…

Hiding and revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics.

"An actual conversation with Hannibal?"

"Yeah. We had been talking about Achilles and Patroclus. Battle tested friendships."

"And *you* repeated it, not the creature." Daniel clarifies.

"Yeah."

"You know who your messenger is, Will. He walked right out of something you've read or seen. Your subconscious remembers. And it remembers the source of the eagle imagery."

"Great. So that leaves the wolf. I didn't really talk about him, but the wolf was further up the embankment, looking down. Snow trails him now where ever he goes. And there were those vines and pink rosebuds again, like the wallpaper I've seen before in that room."

"*Like* the wallpaper or was it the wallpaper?" Daniel says.

"It seemed like paper but it was slapped to the side of the embankment and the wolf was at the top, watching then he turned to go, but turned back once. I got the impression he was waiting for me."

"He was on the same side as me and the snakes?"

"Yeah."

"And what was on the other side?"

"My inferno. In the distance. Me in the stream. You and the snakes on the other side and behind you, the wolf standing in trees and snow."

"Still undecided and indifferent?" Daniel kneads one of the knees fidgeting beneath the dashboard.

Will frowns. "Not…consciously."

Daniel feels the spike of frustration and sighs with the shared burden of it. He looks into the pale blue eyes and sees shades of the Will he knows, feels the trust shining from the pools like a warm ray of sunlight.

"Well, you were passive. Not an active participant this time." Daniel says, "You were holding on to the creature, to Hannibal, in the stream…your Cocytus. You never stepped out of the stream. I was thinking the messenger was holding out the Ouroboros for you to take it, but if you're still missing pieces maybe he's trying to tell you which pieces."

"I feel like I have pieces all over the place."

"Hannibal has pieces of you. Got a piece just a little while ago, didn't he?"

Will raises a brow, hums in agreement. "And then some," he says, "Not all the injuries are from the slaughter house."

Daniel looks more closely at the raw rings barely visible inside Will's shirt, runs his finger along the collar separating fabric from flesh, reassesses the bruising around Will's throat, and touches his fingers to the scraped knuckles.

“Got a piece of each other, huh? That’s why you thought your dream snakes were going to fight.” Daniel says staring at the angry stripes along Will’s throat.

Daniel tries to imagine Will and Hannibal fighting. Despite his injuries, the trim well-muscled man he had admired in the stream had pretty much pummeled Will senseless, and Daniel thinks with mild alarm, Hannibal had unquestionably exercised restraint on his beloved. He wonders how much of the damage he saw on Hannibal had been the injuries Will had managed to inflict.

“Your dreams are shaped by your waking life. Your dreams prepare you for waking life. I know what you dream about in there.”

Daniel taps Will’s head, threads his fingers through the tangle of curls apparently resistant to a comb and is relieved the devil’s beloved acolyte blushes still. Will fusses with the collar, brushes Daniel’s hand away from his tingling scalp.

“What do you think is going on in my head?” Will says.

“I think your subconscious is telling you you’ve forgotten something. Your messenger was holding the Ouroboros, not you. The Ouroboros symbolizes the completion of Self. Sexual imagery, the male tail joining with the female mouth…”

“Anima or animus. Boy with his anima; girl with her animus, I get that.”

“That…is Jung; not you. Jung’s Ouroboros is a singular snake swallowing its own tail. You see two snakes. Snakes are an archetype. A snake in your belly is an archetype, too. Yours broke free.”

“I’ve been starving my beast.” Will says nodding, “Like the snake seeking its tail it was seeking balance. Swallowed the tail of the other. Completion.”

“I’ll just leave the sexual connotations to you because this has more to do with your empathy than anything else.”

“The double Ouroboros clearly symbolizes me and Hannibal.”

“The part of you that you associate with Hannibal and by extension the beast inside you. The conscious part of you thinks you are complete, but your unconscious disagrees. Jesus, Will, your hallucinations… There are people who would pay a lot of money for a trip like that.”

“Too bad Hannibal had to fold up his practice.” Will grips Daniel by the shoulder, gives him a squeeze. “I know why Hannibal is in there. Why are you in there?”

Daniel rubs his cheek over the hand resting on his shoulder and with the touching comes a spray of affection. Daniel thinks Will can be a bit obtuse at times and this is one of them. The answer to his question is right at his fingertips.

“Will, your dreams reflect your reality. You’ve been wrestling with good and evil in your inferno. You’ve been caught between Hannibal and…me.”

“Evil therapist and good therapist?” Will says straight faced as Daniel leans back and flicks Will’s hand from his shoulder.

“You’re awful. Snakes have a bad reputation among archetypes, not usually associated with goodness and light. You perceive this part of yourself, Shadow if you will, negatively. So, you’ve given your messenger a face you trust. When Alana Bloom hypnotized you at BSHCI you told me that you imagined her as…”

“I remember what I told you.” Will mumbles.

Close your eyes. Feel the happiness in your limbs. Imagine yourself in a safe and relaxing place. Safe to relax completely. No matter how deeply you go my voice will go with you.

Alana…

Nodding and immediately grateful he had not disclosed to Daniel more details than he had, Will closes his eyes to shake off the erotically charged images of a dark and diaphanous Alana floating above the table in Chilton’s visitor room while he had sat with shackled wrists. Images of the beautiful creature melting into his mind, her liquid limbs had poured over him letting down what had seemed like yards of long sleek tresses to trickle over his skin fill his head.

“We agree he’s a Classical representation, not an angel.” Daniel is saying, watching Will carefully. “Knowing the reference would be helpful, I know, but he’s a fractured piece of you, Will. He’s somewhere in all your associations.”

“And the wolf?”

“Part of the process, but where he fits is a mystery. Sometimes the hero brings along a sidekick on his journey. The wolf is an archetype you adopted. Your creature is a composite of archetypes, too. There’s been transformation in your journey. Your appearance in your dreams changed.”

“I became more like the creature.”

“When you started, you saw the serpent tailed eagle as evil, but your perception of him has changed. You fought. You forgave. It’s worth exploring why you and your creature are still so… dark.”

“Archetypes of the collective unconscious abound.” Will says dryly. “If I was truly complete I would lose my feathers and wings? Revert back to myself?”

“If your perception of yourself changes, so should your appearance in your dreams to reflect your acceptance of your new improved self. And more importantly, the hallucinations should stop. But, your imagination is so powerful, Will. You’ve imposed your own archetypes I think. All tied to your perception of Self. All based in your own unique associations.”

“By imagination, you mean my empathy.” Will says.

“You’ve struggled with your empathy your entire life. You have to create a new mask. Maybe you need to accept that, too. Even with Hannibal you’ll need your mask.”

“Otherwise my Shadow will eclipse me.”

“Exactly. More like your Id will run rampant…”

“A dead religion, Freud’s psychoanalysis, so Hannibal says.”

“Of course he would. Psychoanalysis assumes people are born with souls…”

Will stifles a laugh. “Hannibal calls it transformation. What emerges from the cocoon leaves its cocoon behind.”

“The cocoon is not your Persona. He’s mixing metaphors again. If he considers psychoanalysis a dead religion, then he’s buried Freud’s student Jung along with it. And for the record? I think he was humoring me back there.”

“Who brought up Jung? You or Hannibal?”

Daniel looks aside then back at Will. “Of course. I did. I don’t think he sees your mindscape within a Jungian context at all.”

“How does he see it?”

“His own context. An exclusive context that defies explanation. Because you defy explanation.

“Your mixed bag of therapy and Hannibal’s constructive destruction. I took the mask off. Revealed myself. Wasn’t that the point of his therapy, and yours, to destroy the um…mask? To release me from my cocoon?”

“Maybe for Hannibal. It doesn’t work like that. Embracing your other selves doesn’t mean you leave Persona behind. We need that self. It’s a part of us. The part that allows us to interact with everyone else.”

“My um…empathy is sometimes an obstacle to being sociable.”

“It may be an obstacle to completion, too. Will, none of us runs around being honest all the time, we all put on masks. We need them. The one you showed your students, the cashier at the grocery store. The one you show Jack. If Individuation is successful, your Persona, the one with a capital P, changes. It has to.”

“Persona is blend of the conscious and unconscious. A more comfortable fit?”

“Potentially. You’ll always struggle against the tide, Will.”

How can either of us know if what I feel is me…or you?

You’ll never know , Will. I’ll never know.

Will cannot change how his mind works. His empathy is what it is. He has always struggled to retain his sense of self when he’s thrust into a social situation, always at the mercy of the assault of unwanted information, images, and impressions that infiltrate his mind. His outward persona is often unconsciously shaped by the people around him until Will catches himself mimicking behaviors, patterns of speech, and fulfilling expectations.

“The Self does not exist in a vacuum of exclusion no matter how much Hannibal wishes it so.” Daniel says.

“I can see why you kept some things to yourself.”

Will pokes Daniel in the shoulder and it feels good to loosen up with him. Really, really good. The broad grin that surfaces as Daniel rolls his eyes at the roof also makes Will feel good.

“So, Hannibal’s therapy in Baltimore was successful.” Will says.

“Partially. You didn’t accept it. At least on a conscious level. Come to think of it, you never got to complete it with Hannibal. Your betrayal of him to the FBI, to Jack, was a betrayal of self. The process of breaking Persona apart can be traumatic and you left it unfinished. Even more traumatic.”

“As traumatic as being gutted?”

“A mutual betrayal as I see it. More breakage. You’ve been filled with regret, punishing yourself for the betrayal. And to top it all off - you’ve been exploring it all over again with me.”

“I am a glutton for punishment apparently.”

Will sighs, rubs at his face. His inner monologues have brought him this far and he finds it ironic that he can’t find his way out of his own maze.

“I’ve experienced forgiveness. Forgiven him. Why am I still hallucinating in my inferno?” Will pulls at the itchy collar, mindful of Hannibal’s expectations yet reluctant to leave with his ball of yarn still so tangled.

The forgiveness has started something Daniel decides as he looks at the pinched lips and woeful blue eyes. As Will is transformed his mindscape is transformed too. Hannibal had called his approach with Will constructive destruction; Hannibal’s unique twist on Jungian psychology, his reinterpretation of the alchemy of transformation. But Hannibal fractured Will into pieces seeking a preconceived image of Will, his imago of Will. Daniel’s approach was not invasive. He has taken the fragments of Will’s psyche that manifest in his inferno and has similarly broken them down, peeled them back and examined them except that with Daniel’s therapy, Will has been a partner, not an adversary.

His emotions shape his dreams and as Will sits curled up in the front seat of his car costumed to crash the palazzo and kill Pazzi, Daniel thinks his approach and Hannibal’s are more alike than he realized. Especially since Will no longer views Hannibal as an adversary.

You want me to find the good in Hannibal?

See the good in Hannibal, see the good in yourself.

Apparently, seeing the good is not good enough. Will empathizes with Hannibal, sees through his eyes and accepts what he sees. Accepting what he sees in himself is much more difficult. Daniel thinks he understands why Will remains trapped in his inferno.

“Your inferno is influenced by your waking life. There’s a disconnect somewhere. Will, this process has been going on a long time for you. You’ve fought it, regretted it, grieved over it. Jung described three possible outcomes in his alchemy of transformation. Two of them are maladjusted outcomes.”

Will sighs, “And I can guess what standing in the stream suggests. Go on.”

"There's what he called Absence, the complete loss of Persona and with it the ability to interact with reality, a kind of unbalanced mental state tipped in favor of a dream world."

"That sounds disturbingly familiar."

"Yeah, it does. You're not quite there, but more stress and trauma could send you there."

"And the other one?" Will says perhaps a tad bit blithely given the furrowed brow and thin lips appearing on Daniel's face.

"Well….if you've been clinging to your old self, that's not healthy either." Daniel says and receives a sharp look. "Jung called it negative restoration, denying the experience can cause psychological stress. Emotional chaos."

"Stubbornly denying the experience I imagine." Will says catching the weary nod. "Well, I've definitely been experiencing emotional chaos. Which one is it?"

"I don't know. You are a better gage than me. I know what it isn't."

"What's that?"

"The third outcome. A successful restoration. Recovery from the breaking down is supposed to bring about a stronger more flexible Persona. Always a challenge with your empathy, but ideally you should be able to navigate in society at ease with the true self."

The crash of crystal and Murano glass roars through Will's skull with memories of walking through the dining room of Hannibal's villa floating upon the fumes of Du Maurier's cocktail into his inferno's dreamscape. The allure of fantasy is irresistible, the desire to remain in exclusive isolation with Hannibal tugs at him even now as he sits across from Daniel.

Occasionally, I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor. On purpose. I'm not satisfied when it doesn't gather itself up again. Someday perhaps, a cup will come together.

Abigail, and the dream of a family with her was not the only teacup Hannibal shattered. Hannibal shattered Jack's fragile teacup letting loose the mongoose he wanted under his house when the snakes slither by. Shards of pretty porcelain, clay in God's hands. Gather up a new mask and put it on.

Time to put away childish things…

"You've forgiven Hannibal, but have you forgiven yourself?" Daniel says.

"I'm not sure what forgiving myself would feel like, but I don't imagine I'd have embraced my nature, accepted that I want…this…otherwise." Will says deciding there is no need to disambiguate in this particular instance.

"Acceptance is not forgiveness."

"But, it's close you said."

"Close, but you're still standing in your stream, aren't you?"

“Yeah…I guess I am. And you’re still trying to pull me out.” Will says, the words sending a twinge straight to his heart.

“Forgiving yourself might translate to less chaos in your head.” Daniel returns. “A dream within a dream. You haven’t awakened to who you are; not all of who you are. The Ouroboros symbolizes completion by consummation.”

“So it does. It eats itself.”

“In your case you um…eat each other.”

“How…apropos.” Will’s thoughts wander to Daniel’s dinner table.

Redemption requires sacrifice.

Communion is a remembrance of that sacrifice.

A renewal of vows. Accepting God as one’s savior. As absolution requires forgiveness

To be saved is to be forgiven.

Redemption requires two entities. One cannot redeem himself

The act of communion is an acknowledgment of that forgiveness.

“You remember our dinner conversation with Hannibal?” Will asks quietly.

“Impossible to forget.”

“Communion is an act of consummation.” Will says. “But you can’t literally eat yourself.”

“Two snakes can’t literally swallow each other, either. I don’t know what the Ouroboros symbolizes for you. You’ve been struggling with good and evil. And forgiveness. I told you to look for the good in Hannibal so you could find it in yourself. Only you can define what good means in your universe.”

Will thinks of his conversation about virtue in the salon with Hannibal. He has been existing; co-existing in a topsy-turvy universe with Hannibal where he discovered doing bad things to bad people feels good. A universe where he doesn’t choke on the taste of judgement; he swallows it down with a chaser of exquisite wine. A universe he’ll return to once Daniel starts the ignition.

“My universe is going to get very small very soon.” Will says noting the sad glimmer in the green eyes stirring the dust of regret in his chest.

“I don’t want to say goodbye, Will.” Daniel says, voice cracking.

“This…”

Will reaches across the console and pulls Daniel close nestling into the sturdy shoulder that has cradled his head and carried him more times than Will can count.

“….this isn’t goodbye. This is advice.”

“Advice?”

“Cut a deal with Jack.”

Will holds Daniel tightly in his grasp though he tries to wrest free, to face Will, to argue. But, there can be no argument. On this, Will is the voice of reason.

“Cooperate. Get immunity. Agree to testify…”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Will…” Daniel’s thought is lost in the sensation of soft lips at his throat; scintillating nibbles prick his skin tingling all over. *Damn him…*

“It’s the only way you can salvage your reputation and career. Daniel…you only have to tell him what he needs to know.”

Will releases Daniel from the hold, his arms slip away from Daniel’s shoulders as Daniel sits back wide eyed, lips slowly curving upward. Will cocks his head to the side, waits for one of Daniel’s lop-sided grins.

“His needs will be determined by what happens at the palazzo.” Daniel says ruffling soft curls.

“And by what he decides happened at the slaughter house. You have been manipulated. Emotionally compromised. Understandably conflicted. You’ll never have to take the witness stand if you play it right.”

Daniel sits in the seat staring, mind racing ahead to an emotional scene with Jack Crawford he simply cannot see happening. He knows Will is right, but it still feels like what it is. A betrayal, no matter that Will endorses it with a wink. He grasps at Will’s arms unwilling to let him go and knowing that Will is already gone.

Will pulls him close again and Daniel melts into the mouth that covers his, tugging on the thick uniform as Will’s hands caress his face, his arms. Will’s fingers press deeply into his flesh his touch lingering, loving and Daniel feels a sweet ache swell and break in his chest. Tears well up as he crushes his lips against Will’s and he opens his eyes to find pale blue pools glistening with the same sting.

The charge is raw between them and Daniel does not feel the surrogate this time. He feels alone with Will as they grind against each other in the front seat, and Daniel desperately clings to a moment gone too quickly.

“We have to go.” Will says into his ear.

“I know. About goodbyes…” Daniel drops a kiss on the bruised lips, and another.

“If I can manage to get back to Fiesole afterward….I will. I can’t promise anything.”

Daniel inhales deep the resignation that hangs in the air between them. He feels Will retreating from him; the pale blue tide breaking upon his shore has rushed out again to sea, to Hannibal. He eases back into his seat and turns the key in the ignition, hits the defogger seeing that they steamed up the windows the last couple minutes.

“You know,” Daniel says, wiping at his eyes, “After you’re gone I think I will write a book. Everyone else does.”

Will looks aside out the window at the rolling hills and the starry summer night. Daniel needs a little levity. Keeps things from getting…morose.

“Really. And what would you call it?” Will prods Daniel’s thigh as he shifts gears.

Typically inappropriate yet somehow perfectly right for them, Daniel settles on something that might appeal to Will’s dry sense of humor.

“A self-help book, I think.” Daniel says, “Couple’s Therapy for Cannibals.”

Will turns from the window, eyes bright and biting his lip. “Not tongue in cheek at all.”

“A family that cooks together…”

Will rolls his eyes and reaches out to stroke the bristled jaw, “Speaking of cooking, what were you telling me about Du Maurier and Lounds?” Will says, handing Daniel his chapstick while the ball of yarn just keeps unravelling.

Jack Crawford clicks off his phone and looks to Zee. He stands beside the tarp covered body pulled from the smoldering cottage while Zee takes his samples from the crisp flaking layers of burnt flesh. The ambulance sits quietly, its glaring lights shut off some time ago, its occupants in the front listening to a local football game.

Not all of the cottage’s interior was destroyed and Jack is hopeful there may be evidence they can use to lead them to Hannibal or, at the very least, understand the nature of the relationship between Hannibal and the departed Bedelia Du Maurier. Or so Du Maurier would like them to believe. Du Maurier has definitely departed, but her body and what passes for a soul are still are very much connected.

Jack is not convinced this is Du Maurier. Without even knowing what the definitive cause of the fire was, Jack does not believe in coincidence. Du Maurier had agreed to meet him at her alleged apartment downtown Florence. There is an apartment leased under a fake name, but his agents reported no one has been in the place for months, if ever. He wants to believe Du Maurier did not plan on him finding her residence in Fiesole. Hannibal sent him here for a reason and Jack thinks he was supposed to find Du Maurier alive and well, but Du Maurier apparently had an agenda of her own, perhaps even suspecting Hannibal might do her dirty.

If Du Maurier planned on staging her alias’ death, a fire would accomplish that leaving meager damaged evidence if not obliterating evidence altogether. The body had been found in the hallway leading from bedroom to living room. Beyond determining the petite corpse is female they have nothing. Identifying the body is paramount but that will take time as Du Maurier knew it would.

Finding Lounds’ receipt in the courier’s envelope had been a surprise. Surprise has become dread, and though neither he nor Zee has given voice to the deep sense of foreboding that hangs over the tarp, the probability that the crispy husk of a corpse is Lounds is inescapable. Jack is at a loss as to how Lounds found her way here.

Du Maurier's car, rather Francesca Dumont's white Mercedes is gone and Jack thinks it will turn up someplace, completely wiped down or perhaps it is already engulfed in flames at the bottom of a ditch.

"Still no contact from Lounds?" Jack asks the kneeling Zee.

"Nah. Something's up with her, Jack."

Zee pauses to wipe at his nose, the smell of grilled flesh adheres to the lining of his nostrils like glue, very unpleasant glue.

"Hannibal is orchestrating all of this. I probably have most, if not all of the pieces, but I just can't see them."

"Wishing Will were here?" Zee volunteers mildly without looking up.

"Yes I do. Standing right beside me in a plaid flannel shirt, glasses sliding down his nose and telling me exactly what was on his mind, filters optional. But that Will is gone."

"You're sure he's with Hannibal. And orchestrating too?"

Jack shakes his head. "This? I don't know. They are cooperating to get Pazzi that much I am completely sure of. After what Will did to Randall Tier, I know how far into Will''s head Hannibal got. *Why* Will is cooperating with Hannibal is the question."

"Well, all that uh evidence you and Jimmy found at Hannibal's villa, the tableaux at Boboli…"

"And all the rest. I know. But, he went to Clayton for help. And we all know how Will feels about psychiatrists."

"Doctor Clayton has a sterling reputation. Maybe he has helped, but he can't say anything."

"Doctor patient confidentiality." Jack rolls his eyes with the words, always conveniently inconvenient.

"If Will was planning something to snare Hannibal, Clayton would know and it's possible he's protecting his patient like he said."

"It's also possible they're sleeping together." Jack says, eyes down so he can observe Zeller's reaction.

Zee's hands pause, evidence bag hovering over the gruesome cadaver. "You know, I'll admit to having a laugh about it at Will's expense. But, If Will found some comfort with Doctor Clayton, good for him. Maybe Clayton's enough to keep him from folding to Hannibal. He was alone before, Jack." Zee shrugs, "This time, maybe he's not."

Jack stares at the back of Zee's head as he paces in front of the tarp immediately taking offense thinking Zee is implying he hasn't been there for Will. He almost barks a retort and stops, knows he has no solid ground from which to protest.

Let me tell you what I think. I think that the work you do here has created a sense of stability for you. Stability is good for you, Will.

Stability requires strong foundations, Jack. My moorings are built on sand.

I'm not sand. I am bedrock. When you doubt yourself, you don't have to doubt me too.

But, Jack had not been bedrock and when Will had checked himself out of the hospital after shooting Abel Gideon and saving Alana, Jack hadn't raised much of a fuss. He had even bragged to Hannibal of all people how resilient Will was.

Even with a temperature of 105 degrees, Will was able to bring Gideon down. I told you, he'll be fine.

Jack rubs at his temple and with his other hand pats the plastic bottle of ibuprofen in his pocket. He thinks of his conversations with Will in his cell at BSHCI. Jack had been cold and unsupportive, but after the circus of a mistrial and Will's release, Jack had extended his hand in goodwill, shown up to offer Will a ride unsure if Will would even get in a car with him. The fact that no one besides Hannibal, Freddie Lounds, Du Maurier, and FBI personnel had visited Will during his incarceration had not been lost on Jack. Chilton would have blabbed if anyone, anyone at all had popped in to see his prized patient.

He had later shared a flagon of whiskey with Will while ice fishing and euphemistically plotting to take down Hannibal.

You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist. Your lure is the one thing - he wants, despite everything he knows.

Will had created a reality where only he and the fish existed. Somewhere along the way, Will had forgotten why he was fishing and when he wasn't looking, the fish had hooked him. Jack had learned later, much later, that Will had started creating that reality on his own, earlier than Jack had been led to believe. Hannibal's appointment book had shown Will had resumed his therapy before taking to the ice with him, and before their trout dinner at Hannibal's. Jack tells himself that may not mean anything, just Will being Will, taking the initiative and anticipating Jack's approval. Then again, it may mean everything.

Nothing makes us more vulnerable than loneliness, Agent Crawford.

Will's not alone.

No, he's not.

The thought that Will and Clayton might actually be a thing, a romantic thing, has been scraping across his skull since the lunch break in between the Paolini tableaux. Jack had shooed the thought away sending all the thoughts of Will and Clayton, like that…scurrying away like mice. Will neither confirms nor denies, but Clayton has all but admitted as much. Zee has struck upon a possibility that Jack had not considered. Will may have found himself a counterweight. Given that his relationship with Will has soured since the debacle following Hannibal's escape, Jack has to admit that Will has no reason to bring him into any loop he keeps with his therapist.

Confidentiality is supposed to protect the patient by keeping those confidences shared in therapy.

And absolve the therapist.

Like your badge absolves you?

Jack remembers standing in Clayton's yard, the smell of fresh cut grass in the air and the smell of sweat and beer wafting from Clayton as they had pondered Will's whereabouts that late and very hot afternoon. But Clayton had relented and dialed up Will on his phone for Jack. Will had not picked up, but Clayton had cooperated. Jack thinks Clayton is thankfully afflicted with a conscience and that means something.

Jack also wonders how much Hannibal knows about Will's personal life. He can imagine Hannibal resenting another psychiatrist digging around in Will's head. After finding Will in Boboli Gardens, strung up like Prometheus, Hannibal's twisted affection and possessiveness of Will is obvious. Jack isn't sure what Hannibal might feel if he were to learn more than therapy was going on. Will might not be the only one Hannibal would punish. Clayton has to know what a precarious and potentially dangerous situation he is in. Unless Clayton is so far into Will's head that he is making the same mistake as Will. Believing he can handle Will, like Will had believed he could handle Hannibal.

He rubs at the grey bristles under his chin, frustrated with the perspiration that collects there and the uncertainty that hangs over Will. Jack can't help Clayton if he won't pick up his phone. If Clayton can't pick up his phone, Jack is already too late. He tells himself again that both of them are probably lost to Hannibal's manipulations.

"Where do you think *il Capo* is?" Zee asks looking up at Jack.

His phone chirps and Jack sighs and takes his phone out of his crumpled blazer pocket, reads the message. He glances at Zee on the ground wondering if he's psychic. He begins to rub his thumb over the screen, scrolls until he finds Pazzi's number.

"Captain Pazzi is at his apartment."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Agent Cummings just texted me from Ospedale le Scotte in Siena. *Il Capo* just tried to call his wife."

"Which means Pazzi went home and found his place empty."

"No telling what else he found, but maybe he is shaken up enough to finally answer his phone."

Jack presses Pazzi's number on the screen and waits. At least the phone is ringing; it didn't go straight to voice mail.

"Agent Crawford." Pazzi's voice booms through phone full of bravado.

"*Capitano Pazzi.*" Jack returns cheerfully. "As you probably know, I've been trying to reach you."

"Been a very busy day. What can I do for you, Agent Crawford?"

"I think more to the point is what I can do for you."

Silence. Jack thinks for a second Pazzi hung up on him, but a weighty sigh sounds off and Jack decides to press. Pazzi laughs softly into the phone, more a disturbed grunt.

“And what is it you want to do for me, Agent Crawford?”

“Captain Pazzi, I’ve been to the slaughter house. I’ve got a pretty good idea of what went down there.”

“Do you? What do you think went down there, eh?”

“Let me rephrase. I am the only person who has a pretty good idea. And if you’d like to keep it that way you’ll stop yanking me around. *Capire?*”

“*Si, capisco.* The place was falling apart when I left. What…do you know?”

“You’ll be happy to know that the evidence placing you there is highly circumstantial, pretty much speculative. I’ve been discreet.”

“Have you talked to *Polizia*? Interpol?” Pazzi asks flatly.

“Inspector Santo was on the scene. We talked possibilities. Your name came up. So did Will’s.”

“I see.”

“I don’t care about your association with Verger. I’ve been looking the other way for a while. That’s not why I called.”

“You want Lecter, I know.”

“Look. It’s this simple. You escaped the carnage. Hannibal will be after you, you know that.”

“I know that.”

“Will was there, too, wasn’t he? You grabbed him and brought him to Mason Verger.”

“He let me grab him. But, you know that, don’t you, Agent Crawford. Your boy is crazy. And you cut him loose.”

Jack keeps his voice conversational. “Will is…my responsibility. You did not alert me, Captain Pazzi. I thought we had a…tacit understanding.”

“I must have missed that. I thought we had *tacitly* agreed to let Graham run free as bait.”

Jack listens to the slow exhale into the phone as Pazzi clucks a tongue that must be as dry as his throat from too many cigarettes and heightened anxiety.

“You delivered him gift wrapped for Verger.” Jack says, “I can’t follow the bait if you don’t tell me where it is.”

“The bait could have told you. He evidently didn’t. Or you didn’t ask. He wasn’t wearing a wire. No way to track him. No phone. Has he called you?”

“No. He’s probably with Hannibal and he can’t.”

“Or won’t. You washed your hands of him. And he knows it.”

“I didn’t want him dead. Will and I had an understanding. He apparently…improvised.” Jack says while telling himself that Will would have gone solo no matter what.

Pazzi sighs, a shaky weary groan. “Like he did in the alley? *Eh cazzate…* None of that matters now, does it?”

“Depends. I still want Hannibal. And you apparently had him. What went wrong?”

Pazzi breathes impatiently into the phone. “Your serial killing cannibal made some deal with the Paolini. Waltzed in and pulled the rug right out from Verger’s feet.”

Jack’s mind whirls. An entirely different array of scenarios runs in the background while Jack asks the question foremost on his mind while Pazzi is still in the mood to answer.

“Did Will know?”

“No…I think he was surprised. I’m not sure he was sure Lecter would even show. But when Lecter finally showed up the two of them…I can’t explain it. Like they could read each other’s minds.”

“Identically different, Will and Hannibal.” Jack nods into his phone. “I take it all hell broke loose.”

“The Paolini left everyone to Lecter, shut off the lights. I escaped outside. I did not see all hell breaking loose.”

“And Will?”

“He’d been tied up, but Lecter must have cut him loose in the dark. I uh…got away from him. I think it was Graham who turned back on the lights. But I was already gone.”

“But you waited outside to take shots at them. They left together didn’t they?”

“You found my bullets.”

“Did you hit either of them?”

“I dropped one of them. Not sure which. I had a bead on one but the other shoved the target to the ground and took the bullet.”

“That…is very telling. And you have no idea which one?” Jack asks incredulous.

“No.” Pazzi blows into the phone.

“Okay. You saw a body go down. Then what?”

“I took off.”

“You didn’t follow up? Neither of them had guns did they?” Jack says unbelieving anyone in law enforcement would pass up a shot at Hannibal, would just let him go. He wants to reach through the phone and strangle Pazzi himself.

“They disappeared. I should have been able to see them, but the terrain… Too dark, too far. They didn’t have guns, but they were armed.”

“You know you’ve stirred up the hornet’s nest. You need protection. I doubt either of them is dead and they’ll patch up their wounds and come looking for you. Hannibal won’t let it go, and you’ve been pissing off Will since day one.”

“I like pissing him off. And if I run into him, I won’t hesitate to blow his head off.”

“Fair enough.” Jack says, “But, let’s not lose sight of the real target. Will may be the victim of circumstance.”

“You still believe Graham is your man? He’s a killer, Agent Crawford. I heard him confess to the Paolini he killed Luciano. Lecter sent Luciano to kill him. Graham prevailed and *he* made that monstrosity we found at the slaughter house.”

“Will’s been in that situation before.” Jack says bluntly, ignoring the told-you-so tone from Pazzi. “Hannibal sent someone to kill him in Baltimore, too. Did he admit to killing Ruggerio?”

“No. He said he didn’t.”

Jack sucks in a breath. Will had killed Tier with his bare hands and Tier had been wearing his creature suit. Will had gutted his Paolini attacker in the alley in broad day light, taking the man down with barely a struggle so witnesses had reported. Apparently he has killed Luciano, too. Also with his bare hands. Price had concluded the cause of death had been blunt force trauma to the brain. Via the nose. And he just had a field day with Hannibal at the slaughter house.

Jack closes his eyes, swallows the bad taste in his mouth. Pazzi hasn’t told him anything that sheds light on Will’s motives yet. His jaw tightens knowing now that Will had split the Paolini ticket with Hannibal. Jack shoves the logistics of that from his mind for the moment. He shoves aside the reality that Will had lied to his face and had lied convincingly. Nothing is ever as it appears where Hannibal is concerned, or Will for that matter. Jack knows better than to attempt to extrapolate from a singular incident the extent and nature of the design. Whose design is the mystery.

Will is an innocent.

Yes. He is. I mean, Will is genuine. He'll survive anything I could put him through. He will always fight his way back to himself.

Not always. So far.

Will is no longer innocent. Hannibal has seen to that. Will *had* been fighting his way back to himself. Jack is not so sure now. Jack cannot be certain of anything. Jack wants to believe Will is fighting still and that is why he hooked up with Clayton.

If Will really did not kill Ruggerio perhaps his version of events at Hannibal’s has some merit. He was drugged, that much is clear. At what point he was drugged is not clear. Du Maurier did not mention Will was drugged during dessert and Jack has no way of piecing together a time line without more evidence.

As it is, Jack wonders how much longer Pazzi will continue to behave as though his wife is not missing.

“What was Verger planning?”

“Look, Agent Crawford….I think I’ll let the evidence speak for me…”

“This isn’t an interrogation. The slaughter pit was pretty damaged. If you could at least tell me what all the…machinery was for. And the pigs.”

Pazzi takes another drag of his cigarette. “Verger had devised a survival of the fittest arena. Sport. Like gladiators. Suspend them over the pigs; give them knives to cut the other down to save themselves. Climb to safety. Relative safety. To face Paolini with rifles.”

Jack had no idea Mason was so devious and sick. A gladiatorial fight to the death in a very real sense and Verger with a front row seat. He ponders the possibility that Hannibal and Will did the world a favor getting rid of him. Hannibal’s therapy had merely encouraged a cancer already in bloom.

“But, the Paolini were just playing along. I’d like to hear some more, unofficially of course…”

“You cannot imagine the madhouse I witnessed. The pigs. The music. Party favors. Everyone… completely mad. I was surrounded by insanity.”

“What party favors? What music?”

“Verger was playing emperor, hosting his crazy games to the tune of Beethoven’s Fifth…over and over. I don’t…have time for this. What is it you want to do for me, Agent Crawford?”

“Where can I meet you? Hannibal will find you. Probably already on his way. Are you at home?”

“Planning on sending someone over?”

“If I did that someone would start asking questions about a conversation that never happened. We aren’t having this conversation are we, Captain?”

“You’re still throwing out bait, Agent Crawford. Now it’s me.”

“When you hunt a predator, you need bait.” Jack says.

“Looks like you’re hunting two predators.”

“Then we should even out the odds. Two against two.”

Pazzi is quiet though Jack can hear him breathing, huffing at the other end as he weighs his options. Jack can’t fathom that Pazzi even has to think about his offer, but he concedes the reward sits heavy on the scale and Pazzi must have it in his head to save his wife and keep the money. He supposes Pazzi has no choice at this point. He’s looking at prison if he survives.

“Captain Pazzi, tell me where you are. He’s coming for you…”

“He’s not coming for me and he’s already been here.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack says thinking it’s about time.

“They have my wife.” Pazzi blurts out. “*Il figlio di puttana ha la mia Allegra*. They took her. Must have been earlier today. *Che cazzo!* I can’t…I can’t get her on her phone. She…she left a mess in the kitchen. None of her friends know where she is…”

Jack rubs a hand over his face, glances at Zee and offers a knowing smile. Zee nods back, rocks on his heels, attentively watching Jack.

“Slow down. Slow down. Are you sure? When did you last speak to her?”

“This morning. *Ai Cristo Santo*!”

“You’re upset. She’s not home. Looks like she left in a hurry but that doesn’t mean Hannibal has her. That’s quite a leap, Captain. That’s fear talking….”

“He sent an…invitation. I’m looking at it right now. I can’t stop looking at it.” Pazzi says more quietly this time, his voice a quivering monotone that Jack does not like.

“What does the invitation say?”

“If I tell you, you won’t send FBI? Because that will get her killed…if she’s not…*Ai Dio mio*…”

“I won’t call for back up until we find him; have him right where we want him.”

“I’d like to believe you, Agent Crawford.”

“Rinaldo…tell me what the invitation said. I can help you. I know Hannibal way better than you do. I’ve got the scars to prove it.”

“The invitation is an old invitation to a lecture at Palazzo Vecchio.”

“He worked for the Uffizi. He is familiar with its buildings. Go on.”

Jack looks up at the sound of the ambulance motor starting up. It rolls over the grass and disappears behind the cottage lights flashing through haze of smoke that permeates everything. He glances at Zee who shrugs.

“On the back…he wrote Joy is on the menu. Bon appétit.” Pazzi says.

Jack turns from Zee and his jaw tightens. Hannibal has played this one beautifully. He even predicted Jack’s response; had counted on Jack to perpetuate the cruel farce on Pazzi. Jack isn’t sure how he feels about being so easily analyzed. There is no doubt a contingency plan built in should Jack or Pazzi show up with a strike force. In the Palazzo Vecchio full of priceless art treasures. Fat chance.

He wonders how much of the plan had sprung from Will’s imagination, if any of it. He does know Hannibal set this up far in advance of meeting up with Verger at the slaughter house.

Hannibal has been very busy indeed. Jack has another inspired thought.

“I’m so sorry Rinaldo. Where did you find the invitation? Was it left there?”

“In the mail bowl. Apparently hand delivered. I still have the package…”

“Leave it for later. Hand delivered earlier today and given to your wife who put it aside for you.”

“Yes.”

The wheels in Jack's head turn. Wouldn't it be a happy coincidence if the courier who delivered Pazzi's envelope and the one who delivered his were one and the same.

"I'm leaving now." Pazzi is saying into the phone, breathless as he apparently runs down a flight of stairs.

"Rinaldo!" Jack yells into the phone causing Zee to jump. "Don't go after Hannibal alone. Wait for me to join you there."

"I told you where to go, Agent Crawford. I have my gun and lots of bullets."

"You know it's a trap."

"I'm already in a trap. See you there." Pazzi hangs up.

"Damn it." Jack says gripping the phone helplessly in his fist.

"You know where he's headed and you didn't tell him his wife was ok, Jack." Zee says.

"I didn't have time…" Jack says. "And if I had told him what then? He would have no reason to go. And he wouldn't trust me for not telling him right away. He'd be worthless as bait after that. As it is, he'll get there ahead of me and hopefully keep Hannibal busy."

"That's cold, Jack." Zee says, rolling his shoulders as he pushes off the ground to stand beside Jack.

Zee stares into the tired brown eyes, watery and creased with chronic fatigue. Jack smooths his lapels, lifts his head in answer to Zee's terse assertion.

"What would you have me do, Zee? Somebody has to make the call and that's what I get the big bucks for. Get on the phone and call the courier service. Follow up on the girl…what was her name?"

"It's on the paper with her cell number. I don't think she ever said her name. I'll get right on it."

Zee pokes around one of his forensic bags looking for the zip lock containing the courier's package. He pauses and looks up to Jack.

"Where are we going?"

"We…aren't going anywhere. I'm going to the Palazzo Vecchio."

"Palazzo Vecchio? Hannibal sent him there?"

"Apparently, the year is 1478 and *Signor Pazzi* is about to meet the Medici."

"What?"

"Agent Crawford!"

Jack and Zee turn their heads to see one of the Firenze Fire Department walking toward them. He walks quickly over the ruined grass with grave purpose. He pulls off a glove and wipes at the soot on his face.

"*Fretta*...You need to come with me around to the back of the house." The fireman nods and begins walking again.

"What happened?" Jack says already in step behind him, Zee in tow.

"We found a survivor."

"What? Where?"

"*Nella vasca idromassaggio. Nuda.* She's receiving oxygen in the back, eh… She should be talking real soon."

"What did he say?" Zeller asks, tugging on Jack's sleeve.

"Naked in the hot tub." Jack says.

"Who the fuck would be in the hot tub?"

"Let's find out."

Jack stalks up to the back of the ambulance and climbs inside. His mouth falls open as his mind tries to absorb the sight before him. Shivering beneath layers of blankets, clearly in shock lays Freddie Lounds. At least the face is Lounds' but the signature crown of ginger curls has been shorn off and the pallor of her skin is frighteningly translucent.

The large blue eyes gaze at him over the oxygen mask from which she sucks in huge gulps. An IV runs from a pale slender arm, the needle seeming taped to blue veined marble.

"Jesus Christ." Zee says. "Who the fuck is…"

"Quiet Zee." Jack says, "I'm thinking."

"What's her condition?" Jack asks softy as he gazes down at the tiny form dwarfed by the mattress.

"Shock. Smoke inhalation. She did pretty good considering she was sedated earlier. Seems she collapsed in the tub and passed out." The EMT says, flicking back her ponytail while turning from the EKG monitor.

"Sedated?"

"Drugged with something. Between the effects of the drugs and the smoke, she's lucky. You know this woman?"

"Sure do. She stumbled out, got as far as the tub? Or was she drugged there?"

"Don't know. Smart girl to stay in the water."

"Too smart for your own good, huh Freddie?" Jack raises his brows.

Lounds blinks her eyes still drawing hard on the mask.

"You got something to tell me, Freddie?"

The bright blue eyes blink again.

“Is she stable enough to talk to me?” Jack holds his badge out for the EMT to see. “If she knows anything at all…”

“She’s dehydrated, still a bit groggy but her vitals are acceptable.” The EMT turns to Lounds, “Do you want to talk to…”

“Agent Crawford. She knows who I am.”

Lounds blinks her eyes repeatedly and lifts a hand to tug lazily at the mask. The EMT pulls it off for her, sets it on the pillow.

“A few minutes, then the mask has to go back on. I’ll be standing right here.”

“As you should.” Jack says leaning over Lounds.

“She…she spiked…my wine.” Lounds chokes out.

“Du Maurier spiked your wine. In the hot tub?”

“Living room. I crawled to the tub. I woke up…naked.”

Jack thinks it no coincidence that Lounds pretty much awakened in the same state Will did after running into Du Maurier.

“Freddie, how did you find Du Maurier?”

“Captain…Pazzi sent me to Clayton’s office. Clayton was there…with Doctor Lecter.”

“Hannibal was at Clayton’s office? You went there after you left Boboli?”

Lounds nods, “Doctor Lecter sent me here. Told me I would find something you weren’t sharing with Pazzi. Said I should bring you along. Should have listened…”

Lounds wriggles beneath the blankets, takes several quick breaths. Jack feels the EMT hovering closer and knows he doesn’t have much time.

“Freddie…do you know if anyone else was in the house with you and Du Maurier?”

“We were…alone. She was selling me this…song and dance…about Lecter being her Svengali. Funny huh? Her name being Du Maurier…”

Jack nods and thinks Du Maurier calling Hannibal her Svengali not only amusing but oddly chilling. And ironic. He doubts Du Maurier’s treatment of her patients hardly holistic. Lounds sucks in more air through her mouth and the EMT nudges Jack in the arm.

“Agent Crawford…she needs the mask back on.”

The EMT slips the mask back in place as Jack looks down at the clipped ginger cat that is Freddie Lounds. Jack wonders how many lives she has left, especially if she continues to shadow Hannibal. Lounds fishes her hand from beneath the blanket and grasps Jack’s thick fingers. Touched by the uncharacteristic display, Jack squeezes the diminutive hand that feels like ice.

“Agent Crawford!” A distinctly Italian, thickly accented voice calls out from the throng of firemen and *Polizia*.

“Jack…” Zee says, placing himself between the miniature tornado hurling itself toward the ambulance and Jack.

The tornado walks right up to Zee, brown eyes flashing and hands waving, his English impeccable and loud.

“Agent Crawford?”

“I’m Jack Crawford. And you are…”

“*Signor Fiore*. I’m told I should direct my inquiries about Lydia to you.”

“Lydia? Who’s Lydia?” Jack says, climbing down from the ambulance and dropping a hand on Zee’s shoulder for balance and as a signal to be quiet.

“My daughter. The staff, up at the house…” Fiore points toward the stucco and terra cotta mansion in the distance, “said she took a walk down here to visit Doctor Dumont. No one has seen her for hours.”

“*Signor Fiore.* I’m sorry but we haven’t seen your daughter.” Jack says feeling Zee flinch beneath his fingers.

“That’s not her…in the ambulance?”

“No. And I think we need to uh…have a little talk about the fire, privately.”

Chapter End Notes

> Chapter Notes for 85
> But death certainly, and life, honour and dishonour, pain and pleasure, all these things equally happen to good men and bad, being things which make us neither better nor worse. Therefore they are neither good nor evil.
> Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Book II
>
> My thanks to the faithful who have stayed with the story. Winding down with more twists to come as we draw ever closer to the conclusion. Up next: Palazzo Vecchio.

Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Daniel and Will contemplate Hannibal’s design as they approach Florence. Joy may be on the menu at Palazzo Vecchio, but revenge is made to order for Pazzi this evening. It’s side splitting fun and games until Uncle Jack shows up.

“There are cameras throughout the Palazzo, Will. Not in every room or stairwell, but there are many. There will be no ambiguity, no claims of coercion nor cover from the FBI, no…hiding who you are this time.”

The pale blue eyes are wide and clear as Will gazes back at him. “Let not my bones be laid apart from yours, Achilles.”

Hannibal holds the curls and face he loves a moment longer and thinks it another gift that Will says such perfect things and means them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 86

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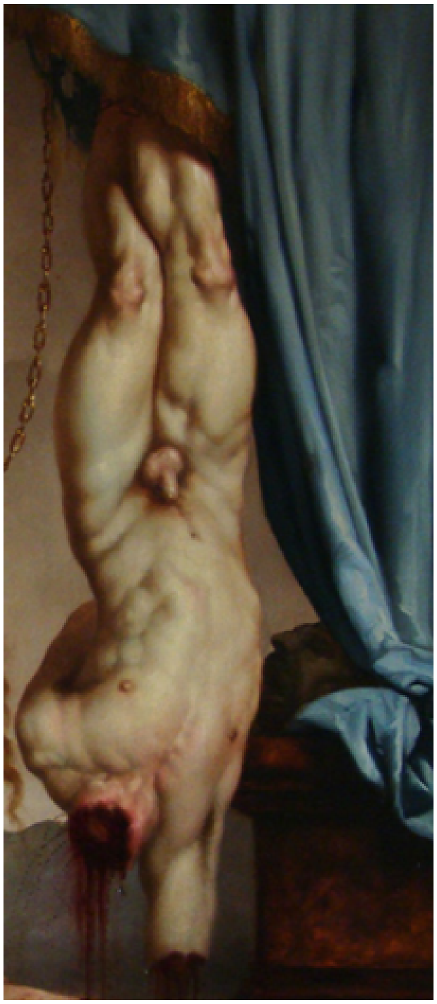


Il Teatro della Crudelta, Roberto Ferri (cropped image)

Even a cask with bottom or sides knocked out
Never cracked so wide as one soul I saw
Burst open from the chin to where one farts.

His bowels were hanging out between his legs;
His vitals gaped forth and that disgusting sack
Which turns to shit what throats have gobbled down.

While I was all intent with gazing at him,
He stared at me and, as his two hands pulled
His chest apart, cried, "Look how I split myself!"

Inferno, Canto XXVIII

“Lounds was peripheral to our honest conversation earlier.” Will says flexing scraped toes inside the supple loafers that should feel comfortable but don’t. “Du Maurier didn’t come up at all. What did you come up with?”

What is going on with Du Maurier? And Lounds…

Trust blooms slowly, one rose at a time.

I don’t smell roses, I smell fertilizer.

Daniel takes the chapstick slowly from Will’s fingers that a moment ago were ruffling through his hair and caressing his cheek, the departed lips linger still, spectral whispers beneath his whiskers. Daniel watches fixated on each syllable as Will speaks thinking how he can snag that mouth once more before he lets Will off in the *Piazza della Signoria* and releases him…forever.

The entire cabin of the Mercedes pulses with Will’s presence, the air is alive with the scent of him; it wafts warm and fragrant through the unbuttoned shirt. The scent of deodorant soap is easily eclipsed by the concentration of adrenaline and musk that seems to permeate Daniel’s overwrought senses. It is the smell Daniel has delighted in detecting about his house; suffused in his couch, upon his sheets and pillowcases, in the laundry. To know that he will be left with dried and faded petals while the rose thrives with Hannibal is a jaw tightening thought. Anger, just a twinge erupts; a thorn to burrow into his chest alongside the blossom Will grew there, sharply felt as Will shifts in his seat stirring the musk soaked molecules between them. The rose has lots of thorns Daniel decides.

He lets his foot off the gas; Hannibal can wait.

“Hannibal said he sent Lounds to Apollo’s temple. More *Iliad* references?” Will says noting the drop in acceleration and approving.

Daniel shakes his head as he glances back and forth between Will and the windshield. Will licks thoughtfully at the cut on his lip, as though Daniel’s thoughts had drawn the tender tongue out to prod bruised flesh reminding Daniel of delicate and intimate moments. Memories of those lips slipping around his cock cause an involuntary tightening between his legs. Will lifts questioning blue eyes; the wood swells and the thorn shrinks. *Damn him…*

“Yes and no, this allusion continues outside of the *Iliad*. And, he didn’t send Lounds, he sent Cassandra, the prophetess.” Daniel pops the cap off the tube, circles his mouth with the lip balm, his thoughts anything but appropriate and he’s grateful Will can’t read his mind.

“She was a Trojan.” Will clarifies while watching Daniel glaze pliant puckered lips.

What did you do with our erstwhile prophetess…exactly?

Sent her to the temple of Apollo, where else?

Will has been tossing around potential Apollo’s in Hannibal’s narrative but has come up short. Hannibal had spoken as though the implication should be perfectly obvious. Only it isn’t.

“Incidental, I think. I mean, who isn’t his enemy…except you.” Daniel says.

The tousled head swivels revealing a sliver of striped flesh inside the opened collar, a glimpse of the angry welts flaring along Will’s throat. The tongue glides over the lips again and Daniel almost offers the chapstick and thinks better of it deciding he’d rather watch the lip licking and leave Will to grab the balm himself.

“She wasn’t born with the gift of prophecy, Apollo gave it to her?” Will asks.

“Yes. She accepts the gift of prophecy but rejects Apollo’s advances. Typically, he gets pissed and punishes her by making sure no one believes her.” Daniel places the lip balm back in the console.

“So who did Hannibal send her to? Who’s Apollo?”

“Our Cassandra already has her gift if you want to call it that. He didn’t send Cassandra to Apollo, he sent her to his temple. I think to find another source of prophecy. After your uh…Agamemnon sent her to me.” The tone is ripe with self-recrimination.

“Pazzi sent her to expose you and me,” Will reminds him, “…pure spite and as a bonus, to undermine Jack I’d imagine. Signal the Paolini they were being duped, but he didn’t know that exposing you wouldn’t have mattered by that point. Hannibal had already cut his deal with them.”

Daniel nods remembering Hannibal’s abbreviated retelling of the fall of Troy but remains silent. After a moment Will adds, “Daniel, you shouldn’t berate yourself. You’d just been emotionally stripped down by Hannibal and your choices were…limited.”

“Like yours?” The taunt is accompanied by an impatient glance. “I’m working through it. Are you?”

Will huffs, shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Daniel is becoming testier with every mile as they approach Florence and though Will expected the fretful process of acceptance to manifest, the anticipation of imminent separation is a constant ache that does not abate, in fact, the aching grows worse. His thoughts wander in the awkward vacuum that ensues.

Pazzi’s penchant for dispersing collateral damage without a second thought rivals Hannibal’s tendency to deem similar sacrifices necessary in the pursuit of satisfying his curiosity, though Will thinks Hannibal views those more as…unintended consequences. Pazzi had sacrificed Ruggerio and had likewise placed Alia in an untenable situation. He had sent Lounds to Daniel’s downtown office hoping her sleuthing would find its way to the Paolini thereby exposing Daniel to even more risk than Jack had. Lounds’ scathing journalism would have at the very least heaped ridicule upon Daniel, damaging his reputation beyond repair and Pazzi had done it to wound Will.

Will’s jaw grinds back and forth as he thinks about the implications of recent actions playing out in their sordid little *Iliad*. Agamemnon’s sins are many, conceived in cowardice and perpetrated with a disturbing lack of empathy. Pazzi isn’t even very good at being bad. Extreme acts of cruelty require a high degree of empathy. The killers Will has profiled had screamed so loudly Will had to twist himself up in a knot in an attempt to deafen the seductive squeals of the sirens in his mind.

Pazzi does not twist and neither does he scream. When Will looks at Pazzi, he sees mirrors and Pazzi is reflected in every one of them.

Hannibal's brand of cruelty is purposeful, a conscious decision to cause pain commensurate with the degree of anguish he imagines the offender deserves. Every one of the Ripper's kills had been deliberate, every slice dealt by the Ripper's hand all part of a deadly symphony carved with a brutal elegance Will has not only imagined but experienced. Like Hannibal, when Will kills it is a profoundly intimate act performed with efficiency, his hands extensions of his thoughts and passions.

Pazzi does not kill; he discards. Pazzi is not cruel; he simply does not care, his dismissiveness of the lives he leaves in his wake a symptom of his insecurities. He is a bloated corpse, a failed Adam; even his Eve is a reflection of him. He is impervious to the feelings of others except as afterthoughts, no more distressing than the crush of a cigarette under his boot. That Pazzi would subject Alia and Daniel to that boot infuriates. That Hannibal, of all people, has actually preserved their lives…persuades.

Daniel senses the disquiet in Will and, concerned he is the source of it, gently places a hand on the tense thigh beside him. He is immediately rewarded with a quick grasping of his fingers and Daniel takes that as a signal he is not to blame for the metallic glint in the pale blue eyes.

"I understand that Hannibal had been acting in what he perceived was everyone's best interest. Except Lounds'." Daniel sighs.

"His approach to damage control. He wasn't worried about Lounds exposing you to the Paolini; he was protecting your reputation. If he had discussed Lounds in detail over dinner, he risked tipping me off about his deal with the Paolini and he wanted to…surprise me." Will says smiling inwardly at yet another unspoken token of affection from Hannibal.

Daniel nods behind the steering wheel, concedes Hannibal loves his springing of surprises and does not doubt there are more to come.

"Cassandra is a tragic figure, despised and misunderstood." Daniel says. "Kind of like Lounds."

"I despise Lounds yet I understand her perfectly." Will tosses off the remark, catches Daniel's expression and softens his tone. "Cassandra did try to warn the Trojans about the horse. What happens to her?"

"When she tells the Trojans not to accept the horse she is ignored. Again, like Lounds. Later, Ajax rapes her in the temple of Athena."

"No good deed goes unpunished. This is the same Ajax who fought and exchanged gifts with Hector."

"Yeah. Athena is outraged at the sacrilege in her temple, especially since she was on the side of the Greeks and had protected Ajax."

"He commits hubris in her temple. That's why she sinks the Greek fleet on the voyage home and Ajax commits suicide with Hector's sword."

Will frowns irritated the cast of characters continues to grow rather than decrease. Karma, he thinks. He had done the same thing to Jack with each and every murder tableau.

Daniel shoves thoughts of Ajax's belt away, leaves them stuffed in Achilles' duffle bag where he hopes thoughts and belt will remain.

“Typically Greek, and loaded with hubris and tragedy, right up Hannibal’s alley, but I think Hannibal has managed to weave multiple associations with this singular story.”

“You um…have gotten into Hannibal’s head.” Will says with a cautionary tone, “And he has gotten into yours.”

“Apparently unavoidable, huh? You have been too preoccupied to think about all this yourself and even if you and Hannibal have reached a plateau of trust,” Daniel pauses to lift a finger in Will’s direction, “…he’s still keeping things from you.”

Will nods in silent agreement. Given their history with Lounds, Hannibal is availing himself of her particular talents for his own purposes providing Will with what Hannibal has decided Will needs to know, again. Trust does bloom slowly and Hannibal would fill their garden with roses for Will to pluck one at a time. Will wonders what would happen if he planted some seeds of his own. How would Hannibal feel about that?

Hannibal’s persuasiveness had likely left Freddie tongue-tied and Will would like to have witnessed that. Will suspects Freddie Lounds may be playing a part in yet another token of affection. Hearts and flowers…at least hearts. Hannibal may have forgiven Will his transgressions, but not Freddie. She received a reprieve in Baltimore and has been running on fumes. Hannibal’s anger runs deep and punishing Will for his part in the betrayal has by no means absolved Lounds. Hannibal’s river of revenge is ever flowing.

Will reminds himself Hannibal’s emotions are nothing to be trifled with. Hannibal has not spared Lounds; he has but given form and substance to circumstances he has orchestrated, notes on the page. Another train riding on rails right toward him. Another rose…

“How does Cassandra die?” Will asks, unsure of the particulars and puzzling over the apparent but elusive portents for the intrepid and so far amazingly lucky Lounds.

“You have to appreciate Hannibal’s sense of humor.” Daniel shakes his head at the windshield, “After the fall of Troy, Agamemnon takes her as a concubine.”

“That’s almost funny and very interesting. The suggestion of um, collusion is obvious.”

“Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra, murders both of them.”

“You don’t think Aeschylus’ play…” Will sighs with the possibility of yet another narrative being introduced.

“No, no. I do think the implied double tragedy is the point. We aren’t looking for Apollo or Clytemnestra. The clue is in the association with snakes.”

“More snakes? Where are the snakes?”

“Cassandra barely appears in Homer’s *Iliad,* she is one of Priam’s daughters, has a twin brother Helenus, and she is the first to see her brother Hector’s body being brought back to the city after her dad convinces Achilles to release it. But Homer doesn’t mention her gift of prophecy.”

“The *Iliad* stops with Achilles returning Hector’s body to Priam. The rest of the war is told with other sources.”

“Of course. Achilles is alive and well in the *Iliad*.” Daniel says tartly. “In Hannibal’s *Iliad*, Agamemnon sends Cassandra on a fact finding mission to…Hector,” Daniel pronounces the name with marked reluctance, hangs his head keeping his eyes on the road as he speaks, “and she gets more than she bargained for. Hector hands her over to Achilles and Achilles sends her to the temple of Apollo presumably to dig up more dirt.”

Will nods, “He knows her nature. Dangled something irresistible. But snakes?”

“Snakes cover the floor of Apollo’s temple according to Greek legend. For the Greeks, snakes symbolized knowledge. In another version of the myth, the snakes whispered in Cassandra’s ear, bestowing the gift of prophecy but Apollo corrupts the gift.”

Daniel turns to Will, offers a knowing glance. “Who is the corrupt snake in your garden?”

You really only need to know one thing about her.

She is the viper in the garden.

“Du Maurier.”

Will raises his brows at Daniel and the lips curl back as associations begin to spill. He closes his eyes as he walks through Hannibal’s villa in Impruneta assuming Du Maurier’s perspective. He strolls through the dining room touching porcelain plates and gliding a finger over the pure silk table cloth on his way to the tall antique curio. He removes a crystal goblet and helps himself to the uncorked bottle of Hannibal’s finest.

He glances in the mirror at his reflection as he sips his plum colored wine tilting his head, assessing the swell of firm breasts beneath the blouse and turning to the side, he admires the shapely curves of the skirt that clings to his body. He takes a hand to the blonde tresses, smooths the errant strands from his mannequin face and smacking his lips; he saunters into the living room like he owns the place.

His eyes are drawn to the open French doors and the antique bureau plat, its polished surface smothered beneath piles of paper. He swallows his wine with practiced indulgence and walks over, sapphire eyes steeped in contempt long grown cold, and gazes upon Hannibal’s drawings displayed on the ornate Italian desk. The delicate jaw tightens slightly at the numerous pads and portfolios containing more cherished charcoals leaning against the wall.

Where am I in your universe? Will says to himself hearing Du Maurier’s warbling drone, every consonant enunciated with self-importance.

I have been your therapist, your confidant. I have tolerated your profane proclivities, shared in them on occasion extending even to your bed.

Will’s bejeweled fingers float over the detested drawings. He dips his nose into his glass, lifts a slender wrist, glances at the diamond crusted watch and with long polished nails flicks the sentimental sketches one by one off the desk.

I have endured your arrogance and listened to your lies while painting countless smiles upon my face. I have subjected myself to the FBI for you. I gave up my practice and my home for you. And I have suffered your… whimsy.

The sapphire eyes alight on the reimagined Boucher and Will imagines hands delicate and small, the finely manicured fingers coiling around the bowl of the wine glass unable to take another sip for the taste has soured.

But this…this I cannot accept. How will you explain this, Hannibal?

The glass splinters in his hand slicing the silky soft flesh so that blood, syrupy red runs down the alabaster arms to drip onto the drawing until paper and charcoal are soaked, the images obscured in scarlet. His eyes track the slow trickle of red, the blood drips down the designer blouse onto shiny black scales that erupt along legs fused together as though the torso extended to the floor. The diminutive high-heeled pumps are gone and Will sees the viper of his inferno emerge from beneath the skirt, its tail undulating across the floor leaving a crimson trail on the carpet.

“Will?” Daniel’s voice floats through his head.

“Hannibal is mixing metaphors again. Eden and mythology.” Will says blinking himself back to the Mercedes.

“Mythology?” Daniel asks, thinking Will’s pearly incisors have taken on the aspect of fangs.

“Hera.” Will says.

“So who is she supposed to be? The snake? Eve? Hera?”

“She’s all three depending on who you ask. And when.” Will says. “Hannibal didn’t have time to finish off Lounds and he couldn’t, not anywhere near your office. So he packed her off to his… Hera.”

“Hera…” Daniel murmurs. “Not the Boucher again.”

“The very same. Hannibal has been using it to introduce simultaneous narratives. One for me and one for Du Maurier. Persuaded her to see the swan he wants her to believe he desires her to become.”

Will chews his lip, the image of Hannibal’s reinterpretation of Boucher’s *Leda and the Swan* is also going to provide more fuel for the FBI so they can burn him at the stake he is already tied to. Du Maurier has likely sent Jack to sniffing around Impruneta by now. That is, if he’s had time to tear himself away from the scene at the slaughter house. Will thinks Jack has been putting some miles on his SUV this evening.

Daniel tries to jump on Will’s train of thought. Du Maurier and Hannibal have been partners in a mutually beneficial arrangement. Will changed all that, upset their status quo. Will is right. There must be some advantage to keeping her around, to stop Will from shooting her at his villa.

“Hannibal has been smoothing the feathers of his swan, but why?” Daniel says.

“She is familiar with Hannibal’s universe to a degree.” Will pauses, “But only what Hannibal has allowed her to see. It’s a really brilliant bit of alchemy, worthy of Lucifer himself. The role of Hera is the perfect blend of lies and truth.

“She looks at the painting and sees you as the goose, one of Zeus’ indiscretions.”

“A picture she never tires of painting.” Will huffs. “She insinuated I was just another of Hannibal’s patients when she came to see me at Chez Chilton. Knew I would confront him. Hannibal would know she was no longer observing, but had decided to participate.”

Daniel grunts in commiseration. “She views your association as a most inconvenient lapse in judgement on his part. Hera’s job to dispense with the pretender and slap Zeus for being a bad boy. Probably tried to dissuade him in Baltimore. It does place her behavior in a certain context, doesn’t it?”

“It signals to Du Maurier that is how Hannibal views their relationship. Hannibal’s inverted interpretation of the myth as a metaphor for forgiveness is below her radar. But the myth mirrors a pattern of behavior Du Maurier can’t help but associate with Hannibal and herself.”

“That is brilliant. Fits right in with his pathology. Du Maurier would expect the epic comparison. But it only explains her behavior up to a point.”

“Doesn’t explain what has kept them together this long, I know.” Will says.

“Maybe they have something on each other?”

“I can’t imagine what would matter after Baltimore.” Will says thinking about snakes and archetypes and symbols. “Snakes appear in the medical symbol. Two snakes entwined around a winged staff. An allusion to her profession of psychiatry?”

“It could. There’s another allusion. The caduceus is used as a medical symbol, but the staff belongs to Hermes, messenger of the gods, sometimes bringer of luck and he’s guide for the dead and for a mix of ancient professions among them…merchants.”

“An all-purpose god.”

“Not for Hannibal. Will, the ancient caduceus was symbol of commerce.” The excitement in Daniel’s voice is contagious.

“Commerce. Business. They shared a business, a practice for a while?” Will asks, hopeful.

“Think bigger, Will. How about a bank account? We’ve been wondering where all the money comes from.”

You imply a conscious choice to be here…with him. Not persuasion or coercion this time.

Nothing so simple. I merely imply my sense of self sufficiently…separate from his to know the difference.

Nothing so simple after all. Du Maurier has again provided a verbal slip, her intention at the time to highlight Will’s susceptibility to Hannibal’s influence but in doing so she had revealed her desire for self-sufficiency and separateness from Hannibal in the same breath. Will wonders which of them is more arrogant.

“That…would be a pretty big bank account.” Will agrees. “They must have had separate accounts in Baltimore. Here, too.”

“They must have something together if Hannibal can float Zeus and Hera. A marriage, Will.”

“Hannibal *has* characterized their relationship as a marriage of convenience.”

Will remembers the rest of their brief conversation about the viper before she had arrived to share a little dessert with them and sink her poisoned syringe into him.

Bedelia is not, nor ever was, my friend. It is a marriage of convenience.

With all the fringe benefits, no doubt.

There are always benefits.

The dark luminous eyes had practically bored a hole into his skull the gaze had been so sharp. Hannibal had dropped insinuations as pointed as the piercing gaze fixed over the rim of his glass. He had sipped at his wine, laying bare his intentions. There are always benefits until Hannibal decides otherwise. And sins of omission.

What is her end game? Or do you intend to hold the cards close?

What do you imagine it is? What other benefit does continued association with her offer, besides the sexual? Ask, what is her nature?

Sins of omission abound. Daniel had dug up plenty about Du Maurier’s past practice pointing to at least one source of her income, but her version of estate planning could hardly account for the extravagance Will has seen in Florence.

Once upon a time there had been something between them or the promise of something; otherwise, as Daniel said the narrative of the swan would never float. Hannibal has been leading Du Maurier along, suggesting he had warmed to the idea of another chair at the table but telling each of them privately there was only room for one. Hannibal would have been as convincing with Du Maurier as he has been with Will. The problem for Du Maurier is that Hannibal had already decided which one.

Will resumed his relationship and therapy with Hannibal in order to explore his feelings. Du Maurier maintained her relationship with Hannibal in order to protect and access accounts. Will betrayed Hannibal over conscience. Du Maurier has now betrayed Hannibal over money. Hannibal’s reason for sparing each of them is directly related to the source of the respective betrayals. Hannibal had spared Will’s’ life out of emotional entanglements. He has spared Du Maurier’s out of those corresponding commercial entanglements. Which would appear more virtuous to God?

Will knows which was more interesting.

I don’t find you that interesting.

You will.

“She has to get out of Florence, Will. So does Hannibal. She and Hannibal left Baltimore together. They’ll need assets to start up some place else and assume new identities.”

“Assets outside of Italy.”

“Will, they probably have off shore accounts together. Passcode protected. Untraceable and outside government reach.”

“I know. Cayman’s. Switzerland.” Will grins, “A mutual insurance package.”

Will sinks into the seat and eases his shoulders back, chuckles softly. “Hannibal made a deal with the devil and he wants out.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel says turning his head in time to catch the merriment swimming in the pale blue eyes.

God made a goof. God doesn’t see it that way, but Will does. Still chuckling, Will turns to Daniel punches him gently in the shoulder.

“Each of them has a bank code. They have to access the money together.” Will says then stops.

Will’s mind spins, lurching into overdrive, associations tumbling one on top of the other. “She bailed on him in Baltimore. But came back to assist...” Will shakes his head. “No, that’s not what happened.”

He tries to imagine what Du Maurier had thought was happening as she had sat across from him at the table in Quantico.

How would you catch him?

Hannibal can get lost in self-congratulation at his own exquisite taste and cunning. Whimsy. That will be how he will get caught.

Du Maurier had referred to Hannibal’s whimsy again, at another table – Hannibal’s dining room table in Impruneta.

As you pointed out from the other side of the bars Hannibal put you behind, our sense of self is an unavoidable consequence of social ties. I…do not succumb to whimsy.

Your current social ties seem to suggest more than a passing familiarity with the concept.

It would appear some social ties are unavoidable, wouldn’t you agree? Unlike you, my sense of self has not been compromised by them.

Will knows he is the whimsy Du Maurier had been referring to, both times, and she had also been inferring that Hannibal’s sense of self had been similarly compromised. Impossible to separate that immense ego of his from the very thing that had blown it up to staggering heights. Hannibal’s narcissism would not permit shattering the beautiful reflection he gazed into every time he looked at Will.

Du Maurier had not bailed. Du Maurier had told Will exactly what he had wanted to hear. She had known Will to be Hannibal’s singular fixation and had encouraged him to play into Hannibal’s madness. Not to catch Hannibal, but to be caught so Hannibal could kill him. Will was the whimsy and was the key component of *her* exit strategy. Except that Hannibal had not killed Will like he was supposed to before he joined her. He had made a mess in the kitchen and Du Maurier had to hang around to ensure Hannibal escaped with bank code intact. Jack didn’t find her; she just let Jack think that.

Hannibal had known she’d be lurking in the shadows and he must have been prepared to suffer the viper’s shadow until circumstances could provide losing it. Circumstances have certainly changed.

Du Maurier likely had not known about Abigail. Details had not been released until much later and those details had been washed and starched by the FBI only to be soiled again by Lounds. Du Maurier had joined Hannibal on a plane unaware that she had been plan B. She must have gathered up her own ball of yarn later. And she's been spitting out pieces ever since.

Will wonders if Du Maurier ever figured out there were supposed to be three seats on that plane.

We couldn't leave without you.

Will hadn't known. And he doubts Du Maurier was part of Hannibal's "we".

"So, one of them is denying the other access?" Daniel asks.

"Oh, it's way more inconvenient than that. They can't kill each other because neither of them has the other's code. Or didn't. Until now."

"With a set up like this, the only way one of them can access the money without the other is if the other is dead." Daniel says.

"At least on paper. Without the deceased's code, the bank can withhold access for up to a year. That's a long time to wait. The undead might show up and contest."

Will rubs at the whiskers on his chin, thoughts whirling around. Passing along faked funeral notices is risky but possible. The identities on the account are faked anyway, the real problem is the delay. If it were Will, he'd make damn sure dead was dead.

"A divorce with property distribution." Daniel says, "So…it's a race to get out of Florence first."

Will snaps his fingers as Hannibal's design slips into place. The marriage of convenience has indeed become inconvenient. Will's arrival most definitely escalated the time table but the divorce is mutual and Hannibal has already seen to property distribution.

"Hannibal does not race. There's no property distribution. Hannibal has already decided Du Maurier gets nothing."

Daniel considers the implications and cannot imagine how Hannibal can possibly predict what Du Maurier will do and when. "How can he control what happens?"

"By having both codes he doesn't have to control anything. Doesn't matter how he got them. Not my concern. But Du Maurier only thinks she has Hannibal's code. She drugged me at the villa and Hannibal was next. She intended to gift wrap both of us for Jack. And Hannibal let her go…"

The scene at Hannibal's table replays in his mind as Will stares out into the night. Will had succumbed to the drugs before actually seeing much of anything, but Hannibal knows what happened in his dining room even if Will does not and Will doesn't have to see to trust Hannibal. Hannibal had enjoyed the entertainment pitting them against each other had provided at the table, but Hannibal had also needed insight. So he had allowed her to move her pieces so he would know which of his pieces to advance on the chess board. Will feels Daniel's gaze descending like summer rain drops, warm and gentle upon his head. He turns to his anchor and the warmth spreads to his cheeks like a ripple of sunlight as their eyes meet.

Daniel strokes absently at his upper lip, the finger sliding back and forth across the strip of whiskers too suggestive and Will has to shift his attention back to the windshield. Will can't decide which of them is worse, Daniel for the constant oral manipulation or him for watching.

"Then, she has to know she has been a surrogate for you. Fuck…isn't everybody?"

"Daniel, you're not a surrogate."

"Except those instances when I am."

Daniel waves a hand, cuts off the protest he knows is coming as the pale blue eyes cloud over. He understood and accepted their arrangement. So did Will. Clarifying emotions at this point is, well pointless.

"Will, she has to know you are not merely a distraction. A distraction could not do what you have done and remain in his orbit. Or alive."

"She has enjoyed a privileged existence with Hannibal. And she sat smug and secure at the table in Impruneta tossing a wet blanket on me at every opportunity knowing the entire time she has avoided becoming an entree because of a bank account."

Will remembers wanting to reach over his wine glass and snap her neck. He would have shot her, or passed out trying if Hannibal hadn't stopped him. Hannibal had himself some fine dinner theater and Will figures Hannibal got his money's worth and then some. He sits in silence contemplating Hannibal's reason within a reason for the delayed gratification besides the lack of intimacy and the blowing of holes in Hannibal's furniture.

Daniel can see and feel that Du Maurier has Will a little hot under the collar and not in a good way. She's gotten under his skin and Will is itching to rip into her. Literally.

"I think she actually believes her own bullshit." Will mutters.

"Been shoveling it at Hannibal for so long, it's possible. Hannibal risked a lot in Baltimore."

"He risks nothing he isn't prepared to lose. It was Du Maurier who wasn't prepared to sit back and allow Hannibal to exert such control over their finances from a jail cell or the morgue."

"Their divorce has been final for a while. Since you're so sure Hannibal has property distribution in the bag, any idea when he started planning for it?"

"Planning? Waiting to put a plan in action is more like it. When he began executing the plan…" Will shrugs not really all that concerned about the when.

"Du Maurier has a plan, too. She doesn't know it's not a race."

Will sits up straight. "She doesn't know…"

"What?" Daniel says, watches the slender fingers tug the bottom lip into a grin.

"Lounds. A random element but Hannibal's design is flexible; it's the outcome that matters. Whatever Hannibal is doing with Du Maurier you can bet Lounds was incorporated into its design. Du Maurier claims Hannibal's weakness is his whimsy."

"You."

"Yes. His Achilles' heel." Affection melts across his mouth. "But Du Maurier is also susceptible apparently. Sending Lounds was not a random decision; it was an opportunity Hannibal used to his advantage. Something about this is intended to arouse Du Maurier's whimsy. Whatever it is, Du Maurier won't be able to resist."

"What is her whimsy?" Daniel says. "Besides vast amounts of wine?"

Guzzling crate after crate of luscious local wine has certainly contributed to Hannibal's approach. Du Maurier self-medicates more than Will does at his worst. Will thinks he has probably never seen her sober. The astringent tang of citrus had clung to her breath as she had whispered through the bars of his cell, a cloying sweet smell that had clashed with the sophisticated designer scent wafting from her blouse.

I believe you…

Will remembers stumbling backward from the bars, disbelieving but desperately clinging to the flame of hope she had ignited and he chuckles some more thinking three miserable words. *What…a…bitch!*

"Lounds could still hurt us." Daniel says. "Would Du Maurier frame you? Or me…for Lounds' murder, I mean."

"That's more Hannibal's M. O., but I wouldn't put it past her. She absolutely hates me." Will grins.

"I think she finds you attractive and repulsive at the same time. That's why she can seduce me and wish you dead."

"She didn't seduce you. She drugged you. She was his Eve for a while. Probably left a bad taste in her mouth to be replaced by…Adam."

Daniel laughs. "No, she probably didn't see that one coming."

"She wasn't the only one." Will mutters.

"Hannibal's preferences, or lack of aside, gender isn't really her blind spot. Du Maurier may have been Eve, but she was never clay. Not like you. She arrived in the garden prepackaged and the more wrapping that came off the more God must have realized the package had been mislabeled."

"And frozen. Good analogy." Will says as he tries to imagine the early days of Hannibal and Bedelia.

"You liked that? I've got another for you. How does it feel being newlyweds?" Daniel says, tone distinctly chiding.

Will thinks Daniel must be harassing him for shits and grins. "What?" Will sputters. "We barely sent each other valentines. This…is new, evolving."

"Your relationship with Hannibal is not *evolving* for fuck's sake. Christ, Will…in Hannibal's head you're already married. He's just waiting for you to catch up."

I let you know me, see me, Will. Would you deny me the same?

But you would never take from me more than I am willing to give.

I can be very patient.

Daniel's blunt comments strike Will like a truck and the words bring into sharp focus the lens Will would keep fuzzy and at arm's length. Will's mouth falls open and remains so as his mind absorbs the impact.

Daniel looks into Will's face and the angry thorn rubs despite the forlorn expression. Will can be really infuriating.

"Still think you're ready to handle Hannibal?" Daniel scoffs.

Will raises a brow as the ball of yarn rolls through the halls of his memory palace. Associations come quickly. Daniel is scolding him and Will admits the reproof is warranted even though it springs from the ache of separation that looms closer with every mile. Catching up is precisely what Will needs to do.

Daniel grabs his cigarettes and jams one in his mouth. A flick of the lighter and Daniel is pulling so hard Will is sure the filter is already blackened with tar. The quiet ocean mist is engulfed in smoke expelled between the agitated lips and Will feels its absence acutely.

Will turns away and stares out the windshield as the city lights appear ahead feeling numb and a tad bit embarrassed. His skin flushes hot under the collar and he is perspiring beneath the uniform and shirt. His mind scrambles over recent conversation. He had been fucking *joking*…

Honeymoon over already?

That…was therapy… Would you like…a honeymoon ?

Will sees as Hannibal sees. Hannibal has not pressed him and if Will is really honest with himself as he looks through Hannibal's lens, he has to admit Hannibal's handling of him inspired. Getting Patroclus to pick up his spear and armor had been difficult enough. Expecting him to imagine what happens after battles, when he returns to the tent too much to ask. So Achilles has taken care of all that. Probably picked out the curtains already.

Did it wound to know I would consider death with you rather than life?

You had to entertain the concept of death. But, you don't fear death. You fear life…with me.

Laughter erupts before Will can stop it and soon he is wiping his eyes with the insanity of it all, Daniel watching closely out of the corner of his eye. The phrase a match made in hell takes on an entirely different meaning. Will has been operating under the misconception that Hannibal has been throwing hearts and flowers to see where they'll land. Of course, Hannibal had made it appear that way. He supposes Hannibal had picked out the curtains in Baltimore and had stubbornly brought them with him to Italy. In Hannibal's estimation they tied the knot on the ground in the grove of fig trees beneath the Tuscan sky. They had finally had their honest conversation. Declarations uttered while pinned against a tree. And consummation. Well, not…entirely. Wounds and hallucinations had conspired to limit the physical act, but the intent had been genuine.

You already shattered the teacup.

Plenty of teacups in the cupboard. A brand new one in Tuscany…or is it Sardinia?

The teacup that had been Abigail is irretrievably shattered, but Hannibal had not given up the dream. Hannibal is ready to settle down. He will allow nothing to get in his way and he will have left nothing to chance. Except Will. Will, he left to Fate. God did make the clay.

Hannibal had known Will would question his feelings; would wonder if he was empathizing too closely with Hannibal, wanting to believe his imagination had created a relationship, that it did not really exist. Will had manufactured the relationship in Baltimore, constantly retuning it, ever aware of the desired pitch required to convince Hannibal. Accurately gaging Hannibal's feelings about him had been of paramount importance while trying to catch him. Jack had been depending on Will to figure out Hannibal's head.

Will acknowledges there has always been an unsettling amount of uncertainty with Hannibal. There was always the fear that he had been projecting what he had wanted to believe Hannibal was thinking onto Hannibal.

You've set some sort of trap and you're goading Hannibal into it. How can you be sure he's not goading you?

I can't.

Worse, he had feared he was confusing Hannibal's feelings for his own as Jack had openly reminded him. He had been sinking in quicksand, unable to discern who wanted what. It had been so much easier to tell himself that what he had felt lying in the huge bed swimming in satin before the crackling fire had been manipulation; not *him*. Hannibal had known the longer Will wore his suit the more comfortable it would become. Had known that Will would become.

You'll never know, Will. I'll never know.

Hannibal had not needed convincing. Will had needed convincing and Hannibal had allowed Will's imagination to run wild, knowing that eventually Will would not be able to separate imagination from reality, would not be able to shake free of seeds once planted. Will's own lies would become truth. Hannibal's alchemy of transformation.

Force your face into a smile for long enough and you begin to feel happy. Hannibal had been sure of Will's becoming. He had not been able to predict Will's intentions.

Why did you come to Florence, Will? Have you come to kill me?

Hannibal had left Will in agony. If Will survived his forgiveness, Hannibal had known anger and hurt would be all consuming. He had not known whether hate or love would prevail and so, relying on Will's empathy, he has been demonstrating what he wants from Will. That Will see the best in him; so that Will would see it in himself. Exactly what Daniel has tried to make him see.

As for Du Maurier…

Off shore accounts and joint assets do not matter. Hannibal can handle his own affairs and probably already has. This is about Hannibal's reckoning with Du Maurier. A pleasure he wants to share with Will. Like Pazzi. Du Maurier was always intended for the table. Hannibal has been letting her marinate. He has probably already chosen the recipe and paired it with an exquisite vintage. Will's lips wrinkle as he ponders the flavor of meat soaked in decades of brine and bitterness.

As for who brings home the bacon…

He has known Hannibal wants him to kill Du Maurier and now he knows why. She is another gift to Will, one that doubles as immensely gratifying for Hannibal. The indignity Du Maurier will suffer knowing Hannibal had passed on the honor of killing her himself, knowing the two of them will be dining on her delicious remains and toasting her demise.

It's the reason the creature in his inferno didn't kill the viper. The pleasure is meant for Will.

Will rubs at his jaw, gripping his own cheeks between thumb and fingers as the surreal settles in his brain. He knows Daniel squirms behind the wheel, also wrestling with the surreal as he drives inhaling deeply from the damp dark filter he's been sucking on.

"I can be a little dense, can't I?" Will says gripping a well-muscled thigh that melts with his touch.

Daniel flicks the smoldering stub into the wind. "You are positively infuriating. Honeymoon plans?"

"Not yet. But, I do believe Du Maurier is a wedding present."

Daniel turns from the windshield to glance at the nose nuzzling into his sleeve and thinks that makes perfect sense in the mad universe Hannibal and Will share. What else would a cannibal offer his beloved? Daniel stifles the sarcasm and poses another possibility floating around his mind.

"Maybe. When Freddie Lounds arrives at the Fiore Estate what does Freddie do?"

Will thinks a moment. "Depends on what Hannibal told her. Snoop most likely."

"What if Du Maurier never sees her? I mean, I wasn't supposed to be at my office. Pazzi must have assumed I would be at the hospital with you and I would have been if Hannibal hadn't suggested we have breakfast."

"Du Maurier has likely given up Hannibal's address in Impruneta to Jack. She needs to get out Florence and is presumably using Jack to accomplish that by dishing out morsels of information on Hannibal and me. She will naturally assume Hannibal will send Jack to Fiesole."

"And then what?"

"She would vacate the premises and hide out at another residence. I know she has one. So does Hannibal. But, Hannibal might be thinking of stopping by so he won't inform Jack, not yet. Hannibal knows she is itching to cut and run but she can't unless she's certain he won't be right behind her."

"She'd be looking over her shoulder in perpetuity." Daniel says. "Lounds might inform Jack. What if Hannibal sent Lounds so that Jack could find Du Maurier? You haven't told Jack about her alias or her place in Fiesole have you? You've been protecting me, too."

Will's entire face seems to crease around the huge smile that erupts. "Pretty devious, Daniel. Hannibal has nothing to lose. And Lounds wouldn't be telling Jack anything he doesn't already know about you and me."

"Except that I have partnered with Doctor Francesca Dumont for Lydia. But…what the fuck. I didn't know who she was."

The lop-sided grin Will finds so endearing emerges. The emerald eyes lift up and Will sees the ache smoldering in them. Sorrow burns singeing his own eyes and Will blinks back the sting not sure if he is imagining Daniel's feelings or experiencing his own. He decides it doesn't matter.

"I'll miss this…thing we have." Daniel says quietly.

"Me, too."

They ride in silence for a moment. Daniel concentrates on the traffic as he navigates the crowded streets of Florence. Will looks at Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore in the distance, Brunelleschi's red brick dome seems to float, a medieval ghost hanging in the night sky above the lights and concrete. He can also see the bell tower of Palazzo Vecchio. The predator inside begins to pace and the promise of that awesome sense of power sizzles along every nerve.

The taste of vengeance will be sweet but memories of warm whiskey and warmer lips, of Marcus Aurelius and Poe resonate through his skull like faded echoes and he cannot ignore the absence of certitude as he contemplates the shape of this shared design with Daniel sitting beside him. His moral compass spins, and it is the awareness of the spinning that bothers Will.

Tick tock. The hour of deliverance rises like angels. Do you see? The creature whispers into Will's ear, feathers falling softly about his neck.

Will brushes at his neck, glances at Daniel and stares again through the windshield.

Rages, debauchery, madness, - I have known all their soarings and disasters… Will returns, his voice sounding solemn and sad even in his head.

My whole burden is laid down. The creature breathes warmly, *Let us contemplate undazed the extent of your innocence.*

And you will carry me off like a child, to play in Paradise, forgetful of all sorrow? Will rolls his head around the silky plumes at his back.

To play in our garden, Will. The mind is its own place, and in itself…

Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. I know, but…

I let you know me, see me. You see virtue as I see it.

I see and yet I do not feel.

Because you will not forgive me.

I have forgiven you. Will insists, leaning forward in order to shake off the beak scraping at his neck and catching himself before Daniel notices.

Have you? You cannot forget your sorrow. No room for pity at the table and no room for sorrow in the garden, Will…

The sigh is heavy that escapes Will's' lips as he looks at his reflection in the passenger window. Dark feathers frame his head like a halo, blood rimmed amber eyes look back at him and Will cannot tell if the monstrous wings stuffed into the seat are his or Hannibal's. He feels Daniel's gaze even before the reflection in the window confirms it.

Have you forgiven yourself?

Will turns to looks at Daniel who has exchanged his cigarettes for gum. Will feels the heat rising and again feels the twinge of embarrassment across his cheeks. Daniel has been feeling Will's emotional turmoil the entire time and the sexual tension snaps crisply in the car's cabin. Will imagines desire dripping like sweat beneath Daniel's shirt and he's managing the sensual overload the only way he can. Will licks his lips and considers rummaging around the console for that pack of gum.

Will sighs and settles for drawing his fingers along the tanned arm resting beside the stick shift and circling the fingers that tap restlessly upon shiny black plastic. Daniel squeezes back and rolls his eyes to Will offering a reassuring smile before turning back to the windshield.

"Took a little trip, huh?" Daniel says rolling the wad of gum around.

"A little one."

"Your inferno?"

"He's still with me, Daniel. Guess I'm still working through the concept of forgiveness."

"It's difficult to forgive someone when the person appears to have no redeeming qualities. We rationalize they don't deserve forgiveness and our hearts remain cold."

Daniel steers the Mercedes around oblivious pedestrians and Will shifts his gaze from the windows to Daniel before his imagination is left at the curb with the bleating herd.

"You're saying I don't see myself as having any redeeming qualities?"

Will flinches slightly at the incongruity of his question paired with his callous dismissal of the tourists beyond the windshield. A perfect demonstration of his present crisis it would seem. He flips open the console and feels around for the gum.

"You were contemplating self-sacrifice. That's seeking redemption. What stopped you?" Daniel asks pointedly.

Will stares into Daniel's compassionate face and remembers the bloodlust that had seized him upon opening his eyes to find Mason and Pazzi before him on the upper level of the slaughter house. He remembers the insane satisfaction of standing beside Hannibal staring down into the pit as the pigs tore Mason limb from limb. After he had tumbled from the SUV before it had crashed into the side of the slaughter house, he had looked up into the roiling flames that had erupted from the exploding oxygen tank and had glanced over at Hannibal, lying on his stomach in the gravel. Hannibal's face had glowed with the blaze of the fire, but his visage had been illuminated by an inner heat that Will had felt searing through him as Hannibal's gaze had shifted from the burning building to him.

A slow smile had carved itself into the chiseled face and Will had felt his lips spread wide and he had been laughing with Hannibal completely at ease and utterly lost in that moment with him. Will had known that he wanted that feeling again. When Hannibal had dropped to the ground, struck by Pazzi's bullet, a wave of despair had washed over him. His training and reason had kicked in but in that brief suspension of time, the pang of anguish at the thought of losing Hannibal had erupted from deep in his heart.

Will lifts his eyes to Daniel, manages to keep his thoughts from spilling onto his face. “It felt like quitting. It felt wrong.” Will says.

“Wrong as in morally wrong?”

“No. Wrong for me. I don’t think God cares how you take yourself out. Maybe He doesn’t care how you conduct your life either. I do care about that.” Will says examining the paper wrapped around the stick of gum.

“So you can forgive Hannibal for being bad, but not yourself. You are about to do something bad together. How do you feel about that?”

“You um…see my dilemma, don’t you?” Will fingers flick the tiny seam of the gum wrapper back and forth.

“Doing bad things to bad people makes you feel good. You feel bad about feeling good. Your pursuit of Hannibal changed you physically and emotionally. You have him. What are you pursuing now?”

But how does one reconcile the pursuit of virtue with an act bereft of it?

Does one actually acquire virtue if the pursuit is bereft of it?

Feathers ripple along Will’s shoulders and down his spine and muscles contract involuntarily beneath the scar. He takes a deep breath and inhales the scent of sand and sea from Daniel.

“I’m not sure I’m pursing anything.” Will admits. “Except Pazzi…and Du Maurier.”

“Short term goals.” Daniel says, “Is it bad to want to do the bad things or is it bad that you enjoy it?”

God rewards virtue.

Does he?

“I think you remain in your inferno because you believe you deserve to be there. No redeeming qualities. Hannibal gave you that wound as punishment. The wound became a scar you gave life to, the serpent in your belly and the creature in your inferno. You see yourself as a bad person because the creature in your inferno is a reflection of you.”

Then, an action is not virtuous in and of itself; it’s a matter of perception.

When God drops church roofs on the parishioners, is that virtuous?

Will still doesn’t know but he thinks God thinks so. “See the good in Hannibal; see the good in myself.”

“You know, it was Patroclus who brought out the best in Achilles. His death caused Achilles to do the right thing…for the Greeks. Achilles’ grief inspired him. In Hannibal’s inverse universe, it’s because Patroclus lives that Achilles is inspired. Hannibal is at his best with you.

“I bring out the best in Hannibal.” Will chuckles.

“You bring out the Hannibal you want to see. I felt it. Maybe…you should allow him to do the same for you.”

“He’s been bringing out what he wants to see in me for a while. But, is that…good?”

“Will. I see the good. Why can’t you?”

Daniel doesn’t expect an answer and he doesn’t get one. He hopes the tremor of a smile that accompanies the tender tug across his ribs is a start.

“Hannibal has forgiven you and you have forgiven him, but as you both pointed out at dinner, redemption takes two. One cannot redeem himself.”

“Isn’t forgiving yourself the same thing? You’re saying I can’t redeem myself?” Will says.

Daniel chomps hard on his gum. The Will who had often caused him to feel like he was being pounded by surf is not the Will sitting beside him. When Will had fallen into the abyss of his inferno, Daniel had fallen with him and when Will had managed to stand back up, Daniel had stood with him. As they draw closer to the palazzo the Fates seem to have calmed the stormy sea raging inside him. Daniel no longer feels Will’s unrelenting waves smacking into him. Will’s little ship no longer rocks upon the water, lost, his compass broken. He has hoisted up his anchor and is sailing toward his destination.

Daniel sighs and shakes his head. Will cannot see his shore for his compass and Will cannot see his garden for the trees.

“Your empathy is an obstacle, Will. You’ve only performed half the equation. Try seeing yourself as Hannibal sees you. Hannibal has his redeeming qualities and so do you. I’ll tell you this – a closer look at his drawings and his sources of inspiration will tell you a lot.”

Will slips the gum between his lips, chewing slowly as the stick becomes juicy and pliant. Like his winged messenger, Daniel continues to guide him through his inferno. The Duomo is closer now and Will feels a surge of excitement as the bell tower heralds the proximity of the Piazza della Signoria and the Palazzo Vecchio. He had wanted to talk to Daniel about shattered teacups and the bundle of joy in Sardinia…or Tuscany, but he knows there isn’t time.

“You shouldn’t pull right up to the Piazza. Let me out a block or so before.” Will says, keeping his arm beside the stick shift.

Daniel nods, eyes darting around for a place to pull over ahead. Will looks up at the street sign on the corner and thinks the jabs just keep coming. They are presently driving along *Via Dante Alighieri*.

“I think it appropriate to let me off here.” Will says.

Daniel glances out the window and Will looks carefully at the reflection mirrored in the street light. He sees a grin, sardonic and sad slice across the tanned features and he is reminded of his conversation with Hannibal as they had stood in Daniel’s kitchen while Daniel had walked the dogs.

He won’t walk away, Will. Too much chemistry between you. Complimentary elements.

Will is inundated with flashes of moments shared with Daniel in that kitchen; in that haven of a house Will is likely to never step foot in again. The flashes continue to click off, each image more intimate than the last and Will closes his eyes, focuses on Daniel in the here and now so he can hold onto this moment, seize it and keep it safe within the walls of his memory palace.

"At the corner. *Via dei Maggazini* will take you right to the piazza. Less than five minutes the way you walk." Daniel says.

"Sounds good." Will says as he tells himself he is doing the right thing in letting Daniel go.

Hannibal's words in Daniel's kitchen haunt him as he ponders the uncertain future that will descend the moment his feet strike the sidewalk.

Separation can be painful.

Much less so if abrupt.

Sometimes better that way.

The taste is still too sweet. You may have to sour the milk.

Will has not wanted to sour the milk. The taste is sweet and Will could swallow down big gulps of Daniel every day, but he knows he has changed Daniel enough and if he leaves now, Daniel may be able to recover some semblance of his former life, rehabilitate his practice and avoid FBI entanglements. And yet, Will feels like he is cutting away a piece of himself and he realizes Daniel must be feeling the same.

"Will?" Daniel speaks softly as he steers the car to the side, double parks beside a taxi with flashing lights, suggesting the possibility that it may be drifting back into traffic soon.

"Yeah?"

"I know you can't promise anything, but if you can…"

"I'll at least call. It won't make much difference and I don't care if you don't."

"I'm not worried about…Jack."

"Think about what I said."

"Yeah. I'll cut a deal. Look, there's so much more I wanted to say, more that you need to hear, but…"

"Daniel," Will says gently, "There isn't any more time. I have to go."

We have to end this…

"Okay, but next time you see him – follow the wolf." Daniel smiles as Will nods, the ache in his chest almost too much.

Will leans over the console, nudges Daniel in the shoulder and hangs his head there, waits for the caress of fingers and warm breath to soothe frayed nerves one last time. He knows Daniel feels everything and Will hopes he also senses Will's resolve and acceptance of what must be and takes those feelings into himself along with the rest. Daniel’s nose burrows into his hair and his hand presses warm against the fabric, heat sinking into his chest. Will smells ocean mist and he feels the tingle of golden grains of sand upon his fingers.

“We share a memory palace now. Maybe we’ll walk along its halls at the same time.” Daniel says. “Play a duet.”

“There’s an entire wing for you.” Will imagines Daniel’s violin swelling with Pachelbel’s Canon as the tide rushes in and washes the grains of gold away.

The taxi pulls out from the curb but Daniel doesn’t shift into gear he looks into Will’s eyes unbelieving that when Will hops out of his car this time he will never look into those blue pools again. He pulls Will by the collar and feels surprise but no resistance. Will’s mouth finds his, the discharge of heat abrupt and wicked as they cling to each other in the front seat. There is a sweetness Daniel draws from the bruised lips despite the sorrow he feels thumping inside Will’s heaving chest.

Will’s phone chirps suddenly, the right front pocket of his uniform vibrates and Daniel almost laughs at the awkward yet pleasing position of the phone throbbing against his crotch except that he knows who is calling. The ache is crushing and Daniel feels the tether snap as Will’s mouth slips away and he climbs out of his seat.

“It’s Hannibal.” Will says quietly squinting at the caller ID.

“Of course it is. What perfect timing.” Daniel retorts.

Will’s thumb taps the screen but he holds the phone aloft, putting Hannibal on hold as it were.

“Daniel…go home. Relax with the dogs. I’ll at least call, and if I can…”

“I know.” Daniel gazes at the tousled curls and the forlorn apologetic frown and swallows down the lump in this throat.

He can’t bring himself to say goodbye. He thinks his voice will give on him, so he waves Will off instead. Will hesitates, offers one more winsome glance at Daniel and turns around, phone to his ear. Daniel watches until he disappears into the throng parading along the pavement and street all the way to Palazzo Vecchio in the distance. It is the impatient honking of a horn that summons Daniel from his momentary stupor and he clicks off the turn signal feeling numb as he moves on autopilot. He steers the Mercedes back onto the street, toward the Duomo and home, to Fiesole.

As he leaves the Duomo and the bell tower in his rearview mirror Daniel’s heart is heavy, with every press of his foot on the gas pedal he seems to sink deeper in the shifting sand, untethered from his ship he is dragged along with the current in an uncharted sea. His muse has departed; he feels directionless and anxious. He recalls a verse from Dante Will had especially identified with and seeks solace in the simple recitation of the pretty verse, if not the hopeful message.

Do not be afraid; our fate cannot be taken from us; it is a gift.

He wonders what the Fates have in store. For Will and for him.

Will edges his way through the crowd, eyes straight ahead as his mind absorbs the sensations all around and he struggles to acclimate to the abrasive transition. For the few seconds Daniel's lips had moved beneath his Will had entertained thoughts of returning to Fiesole with Daniel, throwing a few things in the car with the dogs and driving to…fuck…Austria, Spain, it didn't matter. And when the phone went off in his pocket like an alarm, he knew time was up and he knew he would not. But for the duration of that kiss, he had run away with Daniel.

He presses the phone to his ear as he turns his thoughts from the Mercedes and Daniel to his Achilles on the other end.

"Hello, Will."

Will doesn't hear any reproach in Hannibal's tone, but he knows Hannibal knows he needn't bother with recriminations. The fact that he had to call is scold enough. Will marvels how he continues to respond to the conditioning despite being acutely aware of it.

"Hannibal."

Will weaves through the minions, head down avoiding people's faces, especially their eyes. He pulls the cap out of one of the huge side pockets in his uniform and slides it over his head. He fingers the pair of glasses there, considers whether to put them on or not.

"If it's not too inconvenient…" Hannibal says.

"I'm on my way. Two fingers."

"Ah." The hairs on Will's neck prickle with the throaty rumble. "You're walking from which direction?"

"North. I'll come out by the Statue of Neptune. What street is that?"

"*Via dei Gondi.* Did you give our dear Hector a proper send off?"

"I sent him home. We're on our own."

"That's not what I asked, but I suppose avoidance is answer enough."

"Good. No sign of Pazzi I take it?" Will asks.

"Not yet."

"He might be too upset to think clearly."

"His thinking may be erratic but he knows where to go. I sent him an invitation."

Hannibal's voice floats through the phone as relaxed as ever. Will thinks he should have known. Hannibal would not leave quarry like Pazzi to the Fates.

"An invitation? How…? Never mind. To what?"

"To dinner, what else?" Hannibal pauses and Will hears voices in the background. He hastens his pace, mindful of his two fingers of whiskey and the distance he has yet to traverse.

“You’ll understand when you get here.” Hannibal says.

Will huffs his exasperation into the phone; a little gift. Hannibal enjoys vexing him. “Where should I meet you?”

“You’ll have to go through the Uffizi main entrance this late. If you go through the Palazzo…”

“I may run into Pazzi and we aren’t ready yet.”

“Correct. So you’ll use the bridge from the Uffizi to the Palazzo to get in. Do you remember how to get there?”

Will thinks of the map rolled out on the hood of Daniel’s Mercedes. “Main entrance, up the stairs, take a left. The door to the bridge should be off from the…Archeological Room, corner of the building.”

“Excellent. You’ll emerge from the bridge onto the second floor of the Palazzo into the Apartments of Eleonora di Toledo. The *Camera Verde.”*

Will pauses, confused for a moment and then remembers Italians do not consider the ground floor the first floor. It had taken him a while to adjust, the annoyance of getting out on the wrong floor from the elevator a constant occurrence.

“Is that where you are?” Will asks, hopeful his solo tour of the palazzo will be short.

“No. Once you are in the Palazzo proper, you’ll need to descend to the *Salone dei Cinquecento* and take the grand stairs to the courtyards. Can you visualize how to get there?”

“I think so.”

“Meet me in the second courtyard. We won’t clutter up Michelozzo’s lovely courtyard with our bit of theater.”

“Thoughtful. What’s in the second courtyard?”

“Nothing much. Stairways to the upper levels. The ticket office and the library but they’ll be closed.”

“Nobody there.” Will says.

“Just me.”

“I won’t have any trouble entering the Uffizi this late? It’s closed.”

“Security will buzz you in. They’re expecting you.” Hannibal says, all business.

“How did you…?” Will barely begins to form the words when Hannibal cuts him off, succinctly.

“Tick, tock. See you soon, Will.”

The call ends.

Will clicks off the call, practically snarls aloud as he approaches the *Piazza della Signoria*. Wrathful Achilles just hung up on his dawdling Patroclus. He turns left onto *Via dei Gondi* to take the back streets behind the Palazzo Vecchio. A quick walk down *Via dei Leoni* and a right onto *della Ninn*a should bring him around to the river side of the Palazzo. He'll walk right under the covered bridge he has to cross. A brief jaunt along the far side the Piazza will be necessary to reach the entrance of the Uffizi, but Will is confident his attire will attract nothing more than a cursory perusal by passersby. He has to avoid the entrance to *Palazzo Vecchio* just in case Pazzi is out front standing by the replica of Michelangelo's towering *David* mustering up the *cogliones* to walk inside.

Jack holds the hot phone to his ear as he drives southward toward Florence from the outskirts of Fiesole and the Fiore Winery. He can't locate his phone charger and is flipping through the glove box where Zee, who is listening to him cuss and fuss on the other end, insists he placed it. Jack yanks everything in the compartment out in desperation and the slender white cord falls out onto the sooty carpet.

Jack fishes it from the pile of God knows what and plugs it into the console glancing at the phone's filmy screen. He decides he can let it recharge after he finishes up his call with Zee.

"Okay. Found it." Jack huffs, out of breath from bending over while trying to keep the steering wheel straight.

"I told you…"

"Zee." Jack warns.

"Glad you found it." Zee says quickly. "I can give you the highlights of what *Signor Fiore* had to add after you left. He's pretty shaken, Jack. Their daughter was under Du Maurier's or Dumont's exclusive care for almost a year. Substance abuse, suicide…"

"Yeah, I got that the daughter was troubled. And I can imagine the cost of her exclusive therapy. Any word on Du Maurier's home address? This was not her primary residence."

"Same as the apartment downtown. She lied."

"Shocking."

"Get this though. The only other shrink to see Lydia was our own Doctor Daniel Clayton."

"What?"

"It gets better. Dumont is the one who brought him on. Canine therapy."

"Was it legit?"

"Seems so. Fiore had nothing but nice things to say about Clayton."

"Had nothing but nice things to say about Du Maurier, too."

"The daughter, Lydia adored him. Was doing better, he said, looked forward to her sessions.

“I’ll bet. How old was she? Young right?”

“Almost thirty actually. He was supposed to have another session with her this weekend. Funny thing though. Clayton still hasn’t deposited the retainer.”

“Guess he’s been too busy with Will’s therapy.” Jack grinds his teeth. *What game are Will and Clayton playing?* “Anything else?”

“No.” Zee says, puffing absently into the phone, “Lounds’ condition was stable when they drove her outa here. I got the name of the hospital right here…”

“Hold on to it. She isn’t going anywhere and the drugs Du Maurier gave her haven’t worn off yet, have they?”

“Couple more hours they said. Doesn’t seem like Du Maurier served her the same cocktail as Will. She’s not hallucinating.”

“Because she’s not Will. Is the chemical structure the same?”

“Let me see…shit. Yeah, close enough. But, residuals are hard to go by, Jack. And Will’s dose had almost completely worn off when we found him.”

“Probably doesn’t mean anything anyway.”

“Lounds was fairly lucid when you talked to her. What did she say?”

“It was just a couple minutes. Interesting stuff, but let’s move on to what you learned about the package. This phone is going to die soon.

“About the courier…uh…you’re not going to like this Jack.”

“Lay it on me, I can take it.” Jack says as he careens around the Toyota ahead of him, driver completely oblivious.

“The service listed on the sticker has no record of an employee with her name. The description did not help. She was kind of nondescript and I mean, we are in Italy…everyone looks the same…”

“Really.” Jack says, biting his tongue.

“Awww, C’mon, Jack. I didn’t mean…fuck. You are in a mood.”

“Yeah, I am. So what about her number?”

“No such number, of course. But the joke is on us. It’s her name, Jack.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Breenah Cillat.” Zee says.

“What kind of name is that?”

“Let me spell it for you…”

Jack listens, wondering what ethnicity the last name could indicate when it hits him.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. Hannibal Lecter.”

“Right?” Zee says, “How in your face is that?”

“These fucking anagrams…” Jack thinks Hannibal is having himself a really good time. “So we’ve got nothing. No prints?”

“Partials, but if she’s never been arrested or held a government job, we’re not going to get anything soon, if at all. We’re in Europe. She could be from anywhere.”

“As untraceable as Hannibal. Damn it.” Jack says, “Well, at least we can figure with some certainty that she also delivered Pazzi’s letter to him. Maybe we’ll have better luck with that.”

“I’ll check it out. Should I send a car over for it? Or do you want to hold off still?”

“Sending over a car sets things in motion. Let’s just wait on that. I’m going to charge this phone a bit and then give Pazzi a call. He must be at the palazzo by now, or close if he was walking.”

“Think he’ll pick up?”

“If he’s smart, he will.” Jack clicks off and plugs the cord into the USB port. He turns up the music, a delightful jazz station and allows his thoughts to drift to Bella and the quays they once walked over still water and blue Tuscan skies.

The Church of Santa Croce is situated in the Piazza Santa Croce across from the Statue of Dante Alighieri and has the distinction of housing inside its first cloister, the Pazzi Chapel. A masterpiece of Renaissance architecture at its unadulterated height, before the advent of more Mannerist interpretations favored by Michelangelo, the chapel is also one of the few remaining buildings commissioned by the ancestral Pazzi family.

The current bearer of the name had stood at the locked gates peering into the cloister, past its manicured lawns to gaze upon the elegant chapel built with the Pazzi banking fortune and intended to rival anything the Medici had put up in spite of the pounding their finances were taking during its construction due to the wars Florence had been embroiled in. Thanks to the Medici.

He had taken a detour from his apartment after hanging up on Jack Crawford. Heart pounding in his chest, he had needed a place to think, a place that did not smell of Allegra, a place he could dig deep within himself and find strength to save her somewhere in the well of hopelessness that had opened up inside of him.

He had crossed the Piazza Santa Croce, memories of walking with Allegra here to celebrate the Feast of *San Giovanni Battista* just last June. He had eaten too much gelato while watching the *Calcio Storico* matches, but Allegra loved the frozen dessert and had indulged herself while watching the costumed players scramble after the ball in the red sand brought in especially for the celebration. The piazza had been crowded that day as it usually was. It had seemed all of Florence had converged upon Santa Croce, but Pazzi had only had eyes for her.

Standing in front of the huge medieval church, Pazzi remembers the Basilica Santa Croce had been built around the same time as *Palazzo Vecchio* and built upon the ruins of a Roman Temple. Pazzi thinks there is not foundation in Florence without the dust and rubble of ancient Rome beneath it.

Pazzi never thinks about his ancestors nor does he know his native city as intimately as perhaps he should. His neck bristles as he thinks of Lecter adopting Florence as his own; the insufferable arrogance of the man to use Pazzi's own family history to punish him. It's ludicrous and insulting.

And Graham. Just as arrogant. Schooling him on opera and literature in front of the FBI and his own detectives. Pazzi smiles a grim smile. He hopes they have enjoyed Florence because they are going to die here.

Michelangelo and Machiavelli are buried in Santa Croce even Dante's empty sarcophagus is interred here since the poet had died in exile far from his beloved Florence. Rinaldo Pazzi has never read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He doubts he ever will. And he sure as hell hadn't needed Graham to remind him of how inadequate his education had been.

Pazzi begins to utter silent prayers from the gates, looking out over the graves and sarcophagi of his fellow Florentines. The native son offers a prayer to the Virgin and to *San Giovanni Baptista*, patron saint of Florence. He quickly tosses off a prayer to *San Michele Arcangelo* since, technically, his *Polizia* shield is still valid.

Pazzi finds it galling that he must submit to the raving fantasies of this psychopath and his insane lover, this twisted profiler of Crawford's. He wraps his fists around the bars of the wrought iron gates, his blood boiling. He has no intention of allowing the pretend Medici brothers to mete out revenge to him, a true descendent of the Pazzi in a parody of history no one cares about.

Pazzi scratches his nose, rubs tired eyes and shakes out a cigarette as he shoves off from the gate, turns and walks toward the Piazza della Signoria. As he lights his cigarette he thinks of Dante's inferno and its circles of Hell. Lecter fancies himself a professor, an expert on Italian literature and sees himself on par with God. He clearly shares his sinister pathology with his pupil, Graham. Pazzi is not sure what sin Lecter has targeted for particular punishment and he does not allow his mind to travel too far along that train of thought. His thoughts dwell on the fate of his Allegra. She is without sin, an innocent, and if he has learned anything of Lecter's pathology, it is that Lecter does not prey upon the sinless. Lecter had indicated she was on the menu, but Lecter had used the English translation of her name, and Pazzi clings to that singular gleam of hope that his wife is alive.

Pazzi pats his Berretta trusting that between his prayers and his gun, God's justice will be served. Mason Verger's manila envelope is folded neatly into the pocket of his weary blazer should God grant his prayers. He feels better now, more in control. He thinks that he might call Crawford before he enters Palazzo Vecchio, if Crawford has not called him. He decides two against two are better odds. Those odds had favored Lecter and Graham, hadn't they? Pazzi thinks the odds are in his favor this time.

* * *

Schubert's *String Quartet in C Major* plays softly from the portable stereo sitting on the floor beneath the step ladder. Hannibal has brought a cd for the festivities, it sits at the ready, but for the moment, he has tuned the radio to his favored station, preferring the sound of strings to silence as he works. He finds himself glancing alternately between the Burberry on his wrist and the large archways to his right and left.

He has staged the opening act of Pazzi's finale here in the second courtyard of the palazzo beneath the arches that line the expanse. The arches and pillars double as supports for the *Salone dei Cinquecento* above and they are clearly visible from the first courtyard where Pazzi will invariably enter. The cd is sure to provide a certain ambiance and ensure Pazzi does not ignore the second courtyard in his hurry to gallop up the grand staircase to get upstairs.

He will need to read about the exhibit. The information will heighten his anxiety and it is crucial that he be sufficiently agitated and dazed so that he can be manipulated exactly where Hannibal wants him.

As upset and unnerved as Pazzi no doubt already is, he is *Polizia*, and his training is ingrained. He will infer from the invitation and the description of the exhibit under construction where to go. Vasari's grand stair case is situated between the first and second courtyards and is the most direct way to the suites of the *Quartieri Monumentali* above. It is from one side or other of the spiral stair case that Will should descend.

There is no sign of Will, however, and Hannibal keeps an eye on the first courtyard of the palazzo where the night security guard with his immaculate white cap and equally pristine holster walks the perimeter around the delightful *Putto with Dolphin,* the centerpiece of Vasari's extravagant renovations. A porphyry replica of Verrocchio's bronze original, the *Putto with Dolphin* fountain is one of the better facsimiles found in Florence. Originals sadly cannot be trusted to the masses. Punctuality would appear to be a similarly impractical expectation to entrust to Will.

The guard sniffs at dark stains under the armpits of his bright blue shirt. The color is easy to spot even in a crowd. He passes in front of the fountain oblivious to the predator peering at him. Hannibal doubts he has fired his fancy weapon at anything except to maintain his license and certainly nothing animate and moving toward him. Palazzo Vecchio has entrances, one on each side of the building, but only two permit public access. Usually, the staff departs through the handicapped door from *Via dei Gondi*, but that has been partitioned off due to the sidewalk repairs outside. The entire Uffizi complex of museums and buildings has been under repair and renovation for the last several years it seems.

There is barely a breeze in the second courtyard, but the air stirs with a familiar scent. The whiff of musky sweetness and the woodsy cologne Will favors collects under the arch to his left. He hears the scuff of his shoes on the marble landing, then movement registers in Hannibal's periphery and he turns to see Will emerge through the arch and promptly halt in his tracks.

Hannibal's eyes narrow in the dim light as he gazes upon the slender form that stands perfectly still, hands at his sides and looking deceptively docile in his uniform and cap. He stands presenting body and face in profile, head slightly turned so he can gaze provocatively at Hannibal. It is a most favorable angle from which to gaze upon Will and the occasions when Will has taken up this pose for Hannibal's pleasure have been few. He wears too many layers of clothes to truly appreciate the aesthetics though Hannibal appreciates the gesture.

The capped head swivels around and Will turns to stride across the marble floor toward him. Hannibal tugs at the tarp draped over the ladder until it shifts into position concealing the contents under the ladder just as Will walks up. Will predictably frowns, lips puckered like a petulant flower, evidently still piqued about the phone call. A clear invitation to tweak those lips some more.

Hannibal arranges his face so that Will is greeted by a perfectly blank canvas.

"Hello, Will."

Will rubs at his whiskers and lifts his head in what Hannibal supposes is a greeting and regards Hannibal thoughtfully as the brows wrinkle even more. All too familiar with the passive aggressive tendencies Will passes off with the flutter of silky lashes and liquid pools of pale blue, Hannibal decides to cuff the cub behind the ear as it were. He's had several city blocks and more than enough minutes to shake off what was likely an emotional parting and Hannibal was perfectly within his rights to be peeved at Will's cavalier handling of his alone time with the mouse. So infuriating.

Will's lips quiver as he approaches Hannibal, the effort to control his mouth proving somewhat more challenging than he had thought. His mouth wants to smile, broadly, the simple pleasure Will feels at the sight of Hannibal threatens to spill all over his face, but there is the irksome matter of the curt dismissal earlier and Will is disinclined to let it pass. Hannibal wouldn't. Hannibal would be disappointed if he did.

Will languidly looks over the proud physique and Hannibal draws himself up assuming his familiar odd stance. The outfit hangs from the broad shoulders drape-like; the taut musculature is sheathed beneath the bulky fabric, and were it not for the distinguished beard clipped stylishly close along the chiseled jawline, a cursory glance would reveal nothing out of the ordinary. Which is the desired effect. No one looked very closely at Will, either.

Will reaches into the oversized pocket at his thigh and retrieves the pair of glasses. He slips them on as he walks up to Hannibal and the tarp covered ladder. He raises a quizzical brow.

The corner of Hannibal's mouth tics with approval. The dark frames of the glasses deflect the scrutiny the exquisite features would otherwise invite but the blue eyes flicker beneath the thick glass, intrigued. Will's fingers are already knuckle-deep in the draped canvas tripping along the tarp compulsively seeking a tactile anchor while his imagination visits the other side. He glances at the poster for the upcoming exhibit arranged on the stately easel next to the ticket office, and remembering Hannibal's comments earlier on the phone, he thinks he has some idea of Hannibal's design for Pazzi.

“What's for dinner?” Will says tone tart and tugging loose a stray string from the coarse cloth.

Will's mouth falls open as Hannibal actually shoos his hand away.

“You're late.” The two simple words spoken with just the right note of condescension manage to irritate.

The exquisite chin lifts and the tender lips tremble ever so slightly. Hannibal inhales the musk and the sweat as Will glares, or pretends to, folding his arms across his chest. Hannibal has missed this so much.

“Since you were in a rush, you probably didn't notice the naughty *putti* reclining on the ceiling on your way down.”

Will shakes his head, mouth a flat line. He is certain Hannibal intends to say something positively insulting. Politely, of course.

Not to be deterred Hannibal is determined to pluck the petulant flower and make it bloom.

“The detail is exquisite. There's a chubby little *putto* with thick pink appendages at the top of the stairs…” he pauses as Will's brows arch in warning, “…that reminds me of you.” Hannibal says, triumphant.

The tremulous line between the bruised petals breaks and Hannibal's chest swells as the sound of Will's soft rich chuckling crackles warm between them. Will ambles closer to stand beside Hannibal, maddeningly close. He hovers so his sleeve almost brushes against Hannibal's, a brazen tease. Hannibal looks down his nose at the tantalizing shoulder so close he could sink his teeth into it.

"I didn't realize that the custodians double as a restoration crew." Will says, "I noticed a couple of them upstairs touching up a fresco."

"I only said they were vetted." Hannibal allows and shrugs slightly. "They are the palace custodians in every sense of the word. Mere janitors would not be entrusted with sixteenth century furniture and tapestries in the *Quartieri Monumentali.*"

"God forbid. Where's your custodial crown?" Will asks glancing up at Hannibal's bare head his fingers attempting to massage away the helpless grin.

"Pocket. Keeps falling off."

"Oh? Didn't grab one big enough?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps I could wear yours." Hannibal says daring to trail a finger along the bristled cheek. "I can hardly notice the stitches."

"Only because you know they are there."

Will lowers his eyes and leans into the finger upon his cheek. His thoughts turn to Hannibal's injuries and stitches, discomforts he shows no sign of noticing. The dose of Lidocaine must be long acting. Of course, Hannibal would not acknowledge discomfort of any kind anyway.

Hannibal tips up the visor of Will's cap to better assess his handiwork. The stitches are dark but, so are the thick curls falling over them. Hannibal lets go, satisfied with his work and the tousled camouflage. He moves on to Will's state of mind.

"Transitions are difficult for you." Hannibal says. "I know you hated releasing your little mouse. More snowflakes upon the window."

You look at the crystals of ice and wonder at their beauty all the while knowing it is their nature to melt. Death, whether figurative or literal, is often necessary for change.

Will blinks, surprised but acknowledges the pertinence. The strains of Pachelbel's Canon play *pianissimo* in his head despite the swell of strings from beneath the tarp. His ball of yarn rolls unrelenting and he catches shadows of his inferno whenever he moves his head. Hannibal does not need to know the particulars; he seeks assurance.

"It will snow again."

Hannibal holds Will's gaze. The blue sea churns; the sting of separation aroused by the inquiry is quickly stilled and the sea becomes a smooth mirror once again. Will's command of his mind persuades. Time to see what the cub and the mouse talked about.

"What do you know about Michelozzo's courtyard?" Hannibal asks, leaning close.

"Cosimo I had it redone. What is there now is not Michelozzo, only the architecture." Will waits for the tingle of breath at his neck that is sure to accompany the art history lesson.

"Redone for his son, Francesco."

Hannibal dips his nose into the fragrant curls, sniffs as he would the bouquet from a glass of wine and relishes the involuntary shudder from Will.

"The entire first courtyard was redesigned by Vasari to celebrate the marriage of Francesco to the Archduchess of Austria and" Hannibal pauses for effect, gestures toward the first courtyard , "the reason Hapsburg estates appear in this Italian palace."

"A merger of substantial assets, I'd imagine." Will says casually glancing up.

The dark eyes glimmer. "*Very* substantial. Alas, the Archduchess was not only boorish but stupid. She fell down a flight of stairs pregnant with her eighth child and Francesco married his mistress."

Will does not doubt the historical accuracy, and neither does he miss the implied subtext. Hannibal likes to parcel out his intentions, particularly concerning Du Maurier, teasing Will with insinuation. One rose at a time. Content to allow Hannibal his amusements, Will would rather explore this new environment, this…exclusive universe of theirs that envelops him like a glove.

"Francesco sounds ruthless. Did he and his mistress live happily ever after?" Will says, fingers tracing circles around the tarp.

"Well, for a time. They died together. Either of malaria or arsenic poisoning." Hannibal says.

"Tragic."

"Fated."

"A little music for the show?" Will says pulling the tarp aside, unable to resist peeking any longer. "Schubert. Odd choice."

"That's just a local station." Hannibal says, mildly disappointed Will didn't bite a little harder. He decides it doesn't matter, Du Maurier isn't going anywhere.

Hannibal holds up the cd for Will. Will nods with a resigned frown at the title. So typical of Hannibal to bring a cd. So typical he had this one stuffed in his Ducati. One would think that the Fates consulted with Hannibal on a regular basis.

"Associations will be unavoidable." Will says.

"As unavoidable as the display."

"And very unpleasant. You brought a bag of Luciano."

"Tsk. Tsk. You peeped in my duffle bag." Hannibal chides.

"What do you have in mind?" Will knows the vacuous second courtyard is not intended as the main arena.

“What do you imagine?” Hannibal gestures toward the poster advertising the current exhibit affixed to the window of the ticket office.

Will nods and glances at the tarp. “Misdirection or dinner?”

“Both.” Hannibal says, “A little nibble for Rinaldo.”

“He’ll about lose his mind. I take it you already set the table upstairs.”

“For the most part. This…” Hannibal looks toward the tarp draped ladder. “This is the appetizer. Once Pazzi goes upstairs he’ll need the maître’d to show him to his seat.”

Will sighs, “Let me guess…”

Will drops the tarp and wanders away, heads toward the first courtyard. Hannibal tilts his head back as he puts on his cap. He thinks there is enough time to warrant a quick walk to the first courtyard and allow Will to indulge his curiosity. It is unlikely Will will see much of it once the show begins.

He watches Will cross the threshold, the slender silhouette pauses to stand beneath post and lintel, awed to silence. Hannibal nods to the guard, tips his cap and receives a tip in return. He walks to the fountain, inviting Will to join him with a glance. Will walks over craning his head around the entire distance.

He looks at Will carefully; always conscious that Will’s dreams follow him into his waking world. Whether he wants them to, or not.

“Did you hallucinate on your way here?”

“In the car. I’m um…hallucinating now.”

Will touches Hannibal’s sleeve, a gesture of reassurance however slight that he remains functional. For the most part. He ignores the cluster of shadows huddled against the far corner. He gazes up, eyes trailing up the storied walls to the bell tower and beyond to the clear night sky above. He thinks he sees the clouded path of the Milky Way between the constellations and wonders if Hannibal expects to join those stars, absorbed into the cosmos should this prove to be their last hunt together. He decides the arrogant narcissist edging closer to him would laugh at the idea. For a moment he sees his blonde haired Achilles waving his sword at the sky, both of them running along the beach…

“I bask in the light of friendship that should not have reached us for a million years.” Hannibal says looking up.

There would appear to be little we do not know about each other.

But that little may as well be a galaxy.

The sacrifice you brought to the table carries those galaxies into a closer orbit.

And here we are, spinning stars at the event horizon of chaos.

It is from chaos that spinning stars are born.

“And God said, let there be light.” Will says softly. “I’ve been a spinning star existing in a parallel universe.”

“That universe can be a lonely place.”

“It was.” Will agrees. “But…I’m not alone.”

“No, you’re not.”

Will drops his head, looks around the courtyard at Vasari’s faded murals and the busy ceiling frescoes beneath the arcade. He fixes his gaze on Hannibal’s face looking deeply into eyes as dark as the sky above and he basks in the light he finds burning there. The fragrance of sandalwood and spice punctuates air ripe with the odor of aged stucco, stone and paint, centuries of dust collecting beneath his feet. He remembers talking to Hannibal at the slaughter house, Cordell’s body cooling on the floor, Mason waiting in the elevator.

I suppose you never got around to visiting Palazzo Vecchio or the Bargello?

No I didn’t. But I got close to the Palazzo Pitti. And the Boboli Gardens.

Shame. I would have liked to have shown you Florence, Will.

Leave it to Hannibal to figure out a way to see Florence together while combining business with pleasure. Will supposes they are one and the same.

“About playing maitre’d…I don’t know how many times I can parade in front of our prey and expect him to follow.”

“Pazzi expects a trap. He expects you to be here.”

“He expects to blow my head off. Then yours. He’s going to come in here lock, stock, and barrel…” Will starts to protest.

“But…” Hannibal interrupts, “Not before he finds his wife. He expects to make a trade for her. He knows I wouldn’t take the reward, wouldn’t be able to step one foot in the bank. He’ll need something else. And, he’d be pleased to find we weren’t ready, wouldn’t he?”

Will gazes at the red marble façade framing the entranceway to the second courtyard and the tarp covered ladder, nodding slowly, imagination at full tilt.

“Present him with a manufactured advantage. He’s not expecting to catch us unprepared. But, we are prepared, aren’t we?”

Hannibal begins to walk quickly away from the fountain back toward the second courtyard as a Mozart Aria begins. The volume is perfect. Pazzi will hear it as soon as he steps down into the courtyard from the entrance. He breezes past the grand staircase, Will in tow and halts beside the tarp covered ladder.

“Almost. Better follow me upstairs before expectation becomes reality. Ah, can’t forget the music.”

He pulls aside the heavy canvas and reaches for the cd, slips it into the stereo and hits repeat. Will rolls his eyes as the music queues up. There is a potential fly in the ointment, Menelaus and his cavalry lurk at the periphery of their universe.

“Jack hasn’t called me, has he called you?”

“No. Probably given up by now. I wonder where he is.”

“Fiesole, perhaps?” Will says, hitching thumbs in pockets.

“You and the little mouse put your heads together.” Hannibal’s tone is loaded with insinuation.

Will licks his lips then berates himself profusely for the slip of the tongue. “Misdirection or retaliation?” Will says, deflecting immediately.

“Both again, or neither. Does it matter?”

Hannibal looks into the face fixed in focused concentration. The cub does not disappoint.

“It matters to Jack. He has to account for all that gas.” Will says dryly.

“Uncle Jack has a tendency to show up when you least expect it.” Hannibal runs his knuckles along the scruff of whiskers, the prickle absolutely sensuous.

“Jack…has a tendency to show up early.” Will turns his head offering Hannibal the other side to stroke and otherwise caress.

Hannibal nods in agreement as shared memories and regrets from a particularly rainy Baltimore night hang like ghosts in the air. Hannibal thinks the regret is not so sharply felt this time. He reaches around to cradle Will’s head, immediately twining his fingers through the soft curls sticking out from the cap as Will looks up at him.

“There are cameras throughout the Palazzo, Will. Not in every room or stairwell, but there are many. There will be no ambiguity, no claims of coercion nor cover from the FBI, no…hiding who you are this time.”

The pale blue eyes are wide and clear as Will gazes back at him. “*Let not my bones be laid apart from yours, Achilles*.”

Hannibal holds the curls and face he loves a moment longer and thinks it another gift that Will says such perfect things and means them.

* * *

Rinaldo Pazzi glides a finger over the giant stone pedestal that supports Michelangelo’s magnificent *David,* the stone refreshingly cool and damp on this humid summer night. Pazzi fans his arms in a largely futile effort to loosen the shirt that sticks to his skin. The walk from Santa Croce reawakened his resolve as he knew it would but Pazzi is fairly drenched for his efforts. He guzzles down the bottle of water he just purchased from a street vendor and thinks the water could have been colder for the cost.

His eyes sweep over the façade of the Medici palace, thoughts of Allegra somewhere inside cause his gut to clench so that the water he just swallowed lurches distressingly around his stomach. He sets the empty water bottle on the pedestal, ignoring the disdainful glares from passersby and retrieves Lecter’s invitation from his pocket.

He understands the significance of the location. He essentially attempted to assassinate Lecter and Graham as his ancestors had conspired to assassinate Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici. Pazzi wonders if Graham is aware Giuliano died in the attack and figures Graham likely does. Graham is crazy, but educated. He also thinks it does not matter. Neither Giuliano nor Lorenzo will survive this time. Lecter's grandiose scheme may not work well here. The pompous psychopath is capable of killing without witnesses and staging shocking tableaux, but these require time and privacy and here, in the palazzo, time and privacy are difficult to come by. Discretion is required and secrecy must be absolute to do what he does.

Pazzi can safely assume that no one inside the palazzo has any idea the nature of the thing that roams its halls. Lecter and Graham have successfully monopolized the *Polizia* and the FBI with the slaughter house and roadblocks. As far as he knows, Jack Crawford is the only person alerted to his whereabouts this evening. Pazzi's chance of success increases with Crawford's help. He can always include Crawford in the body count afterward. Lecter stages murders all the time. How difficult can it be?

He will be gone and Allegra with him. God willing. Through his Berretta.

He stares at the invitation he has practically memorized hoping to catch some symbol, an ink blot, anything to highlight some hidden meaning that will indicate which room, or even which floor he should begin to canvas. The original lecture had been given in the *Sala dei Duecento*, but that does not mean Lecter will be there. There is an exhibit under construction apparently, but no current tours or exhibits are open now.

Pazzi hefts his pants up, the damp fabric clinging to his thighs and backside in a decidedly unflattering way. He looks up at the towering pillar of masculinity above him and thinks Michelangelo was a little stingy with *David's* cock and balls.

Maybe his friend needed a little help in the area of romance, so he fed him some...help.

Or…maybe like the emperor Caligula – he fed the genitals to his dogs.

Pazzi tugs at his tie and thinks Graham may live to eat those words. His phone chimes from his pocket and Pazzi pulls it out eagerly. Crawford can come along, but the FBI is not going to run point on this one. Not while he lives and breathes.

"Agent Crawford." Pazzi blows into the phone.

"*Capitano.* I'm glad you picked up. Where are you?"

"Standing out front of the palazzo as we speak. Haven't gone inside."

"I'm less than a half hour out."

"Oh, I can't wait that long, Agent Crawford."

"Rinaldo, think…"

"It's not your wife they have in there." Pazzi reminds Crawford coldly.

Silence. A long suffering sigh. "You can't engage one without the other watching and waiting to step in."

“No harm in walking around, looking for sign of them. We have our phones. It’s a big place, eh?”

“And if you find either or both of them?”

“I have a gun and I am not afraid to use it. Museum or no.” Pazzi grasps the Berretta, takes comfort with the weight of it, the feel of it in his palm.

“If you are set on going in there alone, let me give you some advice.” Jack says.

“Which is?”

“Hannibal likes to hide in plain sight. He blends in, you will not see him until it is too late.”

“Okay. And Graham? Your boy is out there, I mean, really out there. You should have seen him at the slaughter house.”

“Will is…sick. But, you may be able to appeal to his better nature. He’ll empathize with you, he can’t help it. Talk to him. Tell him how much you love your wife. Don’t apologize for anything you are not truly sorry about.”

“He feels my feelings?”

“He imagines what you are feeling. Not quite the same thing.”

“*Ai, merda*! I can imagine what people think, too.”

“Not like this.”

“How about Lecter? How do I appeal to his better nature?”

“He doesn’t have one. I suggest you not talk to Hannibal at all.”

Pazzi begins to climb the few stairs to the entrance. He looks up at the Medici Coat of Arms that hangs above the huge archway and door like a banner. Two lions facing in opposite directions in front of a blue and white field of fleur de lis are the mark of Medici family and Pazzi thinks this especially apropos. Lecter and Graham want to play Medici lions. Pazzi will hunt them down like the animals they are.

“Agent Crawford…I’m going in now. I will show my badge, have a look around. You can pick up a floor plan of the rooms at the ticket office in the second courtyard. I will not engage them if I see them, but I will defend myself.”

“And if you see them?” Jack asks a little too tersely Pazzi thinks.

“I’ll retreat, find a safe place to call you. They won’t leave without me, eh? Sound fair?”

“Fair enough. I’ve been to the palazzo before, but I may need a map. Let’s agree to meet at the ticket office in say….twenty five minutes.”

“Twenty five minutes. Bye.”

Pazzi clicks off his phone and steps inside to stand beneath dim arcade allowing his eyes to adjust. The lighting is muted but warm, casting Vasari’s murals in a golden glow, accentuated by the abundance of yellows and pale ochres in the artist's brush. He is immediately greeted by security, a lone middle aged man, respectable and appropriately officious. He glances at Pazzi's badge and listens to Pazzi explain he is there on *Polizia* business, no cause for alarm, but he would like to look around while he waits for the FBI Assistant Director, he exaggerates, to meet him. They have reason to believe that a heist may be imminent and they would like to examine security, discreetly of course. This is why they are meeting here after hours.

The guard seems to accept Pazzi's explanation, pleased to have another security presence on the premises. He cautions that there are restorations going on throughout the palace and work on the new exhibit will be continuing through the night since the preparations are behind schedule.

Pazzi thinks they have no idea how far behind the preparations will be after this evening.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries that Pazzi endures with one hand clenched around his concealed weapon and the other around the fresh pack of cigarettes he knows he cannot open, Pazzi strolls into the courtyard, heading toward Battista del Tadda's replica of Verrocchio's famous fountain. His eyes alight on the dolphin in the *putto's* arms. He is reminded immediately of his family's crest, two paired dolphins, hanging in the Pazzi Chapel.

He is convinced Lecter laid his trap upstairs but it has been a while since Pazzi was last here and there have been renovations since then. The ruins of the Roman amphitheater buried beneath the Palazzo and streets of Florence have been partially excavated and one of the entrances to it is now another of the *Palazzo Vecchio's* permanent exhibits. The interior of the palazzo has changed with the addition of exhibits from the last time he was here. He thinks grabbing one of the maps he told Crawford about a good idea so he continues toward the second courtyard and the ticket office cautiously.

He glances ahead at the heavy painter's canvas draped over a step ladder as he advances on Vasari's resplendent staircase. Oddly, he hears music. He stops to listen more closely, the music eerily familiar…

No…

The icy chill that climbs up his spine stops him cold in his tracks and saliva curdles in his mouth. Beethoven's Fifth sounds from beneath the tarp, the fourth movement Pazzi thinks appalled that he even knows this useless information, Lecter's classical music lesson at the slaughter house reloads in his brain, and he curses under his breath as he stumbles forward, correcting himself before the security guard notices him and thinks him drunk.

He looks around and sees no one. Sees nothing out of place. He glances at the ticket office and notices the poster on the easel. A malignant ball of bile rises in his throat as he reads about the newest exhibit thinking every demon in Hell must conspire to pave the way for Lecter.

Coming Soon! Dine with the Medici, the Poster announces in elegant script that sprawls across the board, photographs of tastefully arranged platters on a lavishly decorated table are included. The announcement speaks of catered multiple course feasts of authentic Florentine recipes served on Renaissance inspired tableware. Reservations required. The private dining rooms of Cosimo I, currently closed to the public will be open for a limited time. Restoration and renovation are expected to be completed in early Autumn.

Pazzi turns to the tarp covered ladder as the music he hoped never to hear again hums underneath. His stomach roils, it clenches tighter than the fists he rubs against his thighs.

Lecter has left him something beneath the tarp. He prays that he finds proof of life, not evidence of torture. Cautiously, Pazzi approaches his mouth dry and his stomach in one huge acidic knot.

Per favore…Dio misericordioso…Allegra.

He pulls aside the tarp and nearly vomits all over himself. Viscera ooze down the step ladder, each grey metal step smeared with innards interspersed with bits of bone. He closes his eyes and reminds himself that Lecter is a psychopath with a very twisted sense of humor. He repeats this until he convinces himself of it. He opens eyes that burn and forces himself to examine the grotesque display more closely. The smell is nauseating and Pazzi is grateful he did not eat before walking here.

His jaw tightens as he recognizes two, no three, distinct body parts that do not qualify as viscera though they are plenty bloody. A pale shrunken penis extends over one step and the only reason it does not slide off the metal is because it is still attached, barely, to the scrotum staked to the step, a shiny nail through each testicle. The testicles have been clipped neatly, not torn or ripped. The removal was done with care, very…surgical. He clenches his fists as he stares, momentarily stupefied as his mind reels trying to imagine whose cock and balls adorn the ladder. And which one of them did it.

Well, uh…the inventory suggests Luciano's genitals are missing

Maybe they didn't fit…with the design.

Graham. This is Luciano…all over the ladder. Pazzi backs away swallowing disgust and wiping saliva from lips that can't seem to keep still. He glances around the empty courtyard and back to the exhibit poster. Graham and Lecter are upstairs with Allegra. He pictures all three of them sitting around a table of empty plates in Cosimo's dining room waiting for him. The thought that Lecter plans on feeding him to his wife will not go away. Another thought surfaces more horrible than the first. The idea that Graham intends on castrating him so that Allegra can literally eat him is so firmly branded into his brain that Pazzi breaks out in a cold sweat. He drops the tarp so as not to alert the security guard who has amazingly not noticed anything amiss and unsnaps his holster.

He crosses to the grand stair case. He'd like to take two at a time, but the incline is sharp and the spiraling doesn't facilitate speed. Besides, there is a workman making his way down the stairs, one of the museum custodians who must have been on his way down even before Pazzi started up.

The capped head is lowered, the visor nearly resting on the thick frames of glasses that reflect the overhead lights so that it is difficult see his features save for the scruffy stubble in fashion these days. Pazzi slows to allow the custodian to pass and Pazzi wonders why he seems in such a hurry. And avoidant. He hugs the railing intending to edge around Pazzi, not even looking up and Pazzi realizes that the workman should be looking at him and the Berretta in his hand. The music alone should have caught his attention.

Pazzi moves to the middle of the staircase, effectively blocking his path so that the custodian is forced to acknowledge him. He does. Sort of. As they nearly collide on the steps, the head lifts, turns to afford a sideways glance and Pazzi catches a glimpse of the distinctive blue eyes that have been taunting him for weeks.

Graham.

Time seems to slow down. Pazzi thinks he must have started down the stairs for something not expecting Pazzi to be here. He had decided to continue since he was already more than half way down when Pazzi had set foot on the stairs. To turn and run would have alerted Pazzi immediately. He had taken a chance hoping Pazzi would be too preoccupied with the disgusting display downstairs to notice.

Pazzi raises his gun, realizing he has an excellent shot to either kill or incapacitate Graham. Even if Graham runs now, he cannot get far enough away to elude Pazzi or his Berretta.

Graham must have realized the same thing because he shoves Pazzi suddenly and bolts down the stairs. Pazzi lunges after him, gun in hand. He remembers the security guard downstairs and decides not to shout or shoot. Graham wouldn't listen anyway. Pazzi needs to grab him before he reaches Lecter. Pazzi does not need to prowl the palazzo if he has a hostage.

He thinks he can slam Graham in the head again without knocking him out. He just wants to subdue him so he can have some leverage with Lecter.

I'm coming Allegra…

Graham skitters across the marble floor, loafers slipping on the smooth surface and he swerves into the volute newel of the grand stairs on the other side, his stomach taking the brunt of the curved polished wood. Pazzi has to admit he is fast, but he is clumsy, not a natural athlete. He stumbles on the steps, knee slamming against a baluster. Grunting, he begins to ascend the stairs albeit a bit unsteadily.

Pazzi closes the space between them quickly. He is a sprinter by nature and due to his vices; short spurts of speed are about all he can manage these days. He runs fast enough to catch Graham and that is really all that matters.

He tackles Graham, slams him hard against the steps, his body twists in what must be a painful angle. This pleases Pazzi to no end. He huffs as he stares into Pazzi's face, glasses hanging askew and cap barely containing the mop of hair spilling out beneath it. Pazzi yanks the glasses from off his face, knowing Graham doesn't need them and Pazzi wouldn't care if he did. He tosses them aside and leans in low so he hovers over Graham, sprawled along the stairs and staring at the gun pointed at his head, defiant, smug, just like Lecter had been at the slaughter house.

Identically different, Will and Hannibal…Appeal to his better nature. Tell him how much you love your wife…

Graham's better nature is irrelevant; the Berretta is far more appealing and persuasive. The impulse to smash the butt of his gun into Graham's face is overwhelming.

"Where is she?"

"Who?" Graham blows the word through his lips, eyes wide in a parody of innocence.

Pazzi clubs him in the side of the head for that. Graham takes it; he has to. The eyes flash with pain, but the defiance remains in the curl of his lips.

"My wife. Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"I have never seen your wife." Graham says, tone as cold as a tomb.

“Enough games. Take me to her.”

“I already told you…”

Pazzi grinds the barrel of his Berretta into the Adam’s apple and the satisfaction he feels as Graham struggles to breathe is immense. The satisfaction is ripped from him as Graham’s hand appears in the corner of his eye and his Berretta clatters onto the stairs. Pazzi scrambles for his weapon as Graham makes a run for it up the stairs.

Pazzi grabs his gun, spewing profanities all the way up the steps. He catches Graham by the collar at the top of the steps and drags Graham from the landing into the *Sala dei Cinquecento*. They grab at each other seeking advantage as they grapple with fabric and scuffle across the polished floor. The hall spins with color as the paintings covering walls and ceiling whiz around in a blur, gilded frames glitter, the effect dizzying. Graham groans and jerks away from him, slipping from Pazzi’s grasp he stumbles off disoriented, chest heaving. Pazzi thinks he must have clocked Graham harder than he thought.

Pazzi advances on him and Graham swings and he takes a hard hit to his gut but he returns the punch with the hand gripping the Berretta landing a solid blow to Graham’s jaw. The force knocks Graham to the floor and Pazzi is on him in no time. He grabs a handful of curls, a serious disadvantage to have so much hair in a fight, and he yanks Graham up to his knees. Breathless, he presses the gun to Graham’s temple.

Graham licks at the blood trickling from his mouth and Pazzi thinks he may have knocked out a tooth or close. He tightens his grip on the curls and lifts Graham’s head so he can see him better. He presses the barrel into Graham’s scalp just above the fresh stitches that throb with every pulse. The blue eyes glisten and the mouth winces in pain, the smug smirk erased with the press of his gun.

“Take me to your boyfriend, then.”

“No.” The voice cracks.

“You think I won’t shoot you here in the palazzo?”

“I think…you won’t risk upsetting Hannibal.”

Pazzi considers this. He realizes Graham is playing for time. Lecter is expecting him to return from wherever Graham was headed. If Graham does not return in a reasonable amount of time, Lecter will assume there is problem. Lecter may investigate but Pazzi thinks it more likely Lecter would wait. Until he decides to retaliate. Pazzi needs to get Graham to wherever Lecter is with as much stealth as possible.

Crawford is on his way. Pazzi has lost track of time, but Crawford will find the miniature tableau as he had. Crawford is smart. He will figure out Lecter’s ruse. Pazzi need only keep Lecter busy until the other gun arrives.

“I know what you are trying to do.” Pazzi says.

Pazzi looks down into the disturbingly intense blue eyes glaring up at him from beneath the thick brows. The admittedly attractive features have taken on a sinister aspect that Pazzi finds bone chilling. Crawford’s prize profiler has finally cracked. Graham is completely gone. His words confirm the madness.

“Do you? Too much knowing is misery, didn’t you know?”

“What are you talking about?” Pazzi says impatient and increasingly unnerved. “Get up.”

“Give me a good reason and I’ll think about it.”

Pazzi shakes Graham’s head, watches him jerk and flinch as his brains roll around his skull. Graham is already brain damaged, what difference will a couple more knocks make?

“I want my wife, Mr. Graham. I intend to trade you for her. Lecter rescued you from Verger, orchestrated the entire thing. All for you.”

“And how does that help you?”

“I love my wife. He loves you.”

“Not more than he loves himself.” Grahams says, eyes rolling up to meet Pazzi’s.

“Let’s found out, eh? Which…dining room is he in?”

Graham’s eyes flick nervously to a corridor leading off from the *Sala dei Cinquecento* and Pazzi begins to drag him there by the scalp. Graham crawls along the floor, knees sliding easily as though Pazzi pulls him across an ice rink.

“All right. All right.” Graham mutters, pleadingly, “Let me up. I’ll walk you there. But it’s not what you think.”

“And you think you know what I think?” Pazzi spits the words. “You’re fucked up, Graham. You and Lecter should have left my wife alone, run while you had the chance. Which one of you did I shoot, anyway?”

“Hannibal. But you were aiming for me, weren’t you? Shouldn’t have done that. You should have killed him instead of…making him mad.”

“A mistake I intend to fix.”

Pazzi halts his advance across the hall, releases the fistful of hair and watches Graham rise slowly, Berretta trained at his head as Graham smooths out his rumpled uniform Pazzi thinks resembles a prison jumpsuit. If Graham is lucky, he may end up wearing one. He grabs Graham by the shoulder, stops him from walking in front.

“Oh no. You walk beside me. We’ll enter the dining room together. Which one of the apartments?”

Graham manages to flash a wicked smile. “Lorenzo the Magnificent’s, of course.”

They walk uneasily, joined at the hip down the narrow corridor, Pazzi’s gun pressed into Graham’s ribs. Graham hesitates before the large wooden doors in front of them. Pazzi stands beside him listening, but the doors are solid and thick the smooth surface shines with layers of veneer and centuries of oily hands. Pazzi knows virtually nothing about this section of the apartments and he has no one to blame but himself.

This floor of the palazzo is still used by the city government and Pazzi has never had reason to visit the offices in any official capacity. This section is available to the public, but Pazzi has never toured this floor beyond the *Sala dei Cinquecento*. In short, he has no idea what Lorenzo the Magnificent's room looks like.

"Open the doors. All the way."

He watches Graham turn the brass door knobs, nerves on edge, jaws locked in place as the heavy door swings open, hinges creaking with the weight. Graham pulls the doors open, slowly, and spreads them apart so they swing wide flush with the walls on either side. Pazzi nudges the ribs he's been poking for the last couple minutes, prompting Graham to walk with him through the entrance wide enough to accommodate both of them. He stops nudging when he lays eyes on the décor.

Pazzi is temporarily paralyzed. He cannot process what he sees quickly enough. More classical music plays from somewhere in the vaulted room. It's difficult to tell from which direction. Every wall is hidden behind a cascade of fabric, huge tarps, more like surgical curtains have been placed in front of the tapestries and paintings he knows must be there. A long heavy wood table extends nearly the length of the room, also draped with tarp and incongruously exquisitely set at the far end. High backed chairs encircle the far end of the table and, propped up in one of the chairs sits a still figure, swathed in shadow.

Just as he realizes he is gazing at a mannequin he feels a hand tighten on his wrist and the Berretta slips from his grasp as Graham applies pressure so painfully effective that Pazzi nearly drops to his knees. As he is flung across the room he thinks fleetingly that dropping to his knees would have been better. Graham is suddenly on top of him. Pazzi flails helplessly as Graham's hands grip his skull and slam his head against the floor, repeatedly.

"I told you…it's not what you think." Graham hisses softly, "Now…get up."

"Where…what did you do with my wife?"

His head is slammed mercilessly against the floor again. Graham sighs above him, exasperated.

"And I told you…I have never seen your wife. Get…Up."

Pazzi's head swims but he does as Graham says, too dazed to think. As soon as he stands up upright Graham punches him full in the face and Pazzi feels his nose shift to the left as blood spurts and drips into his mouth. He is unceremoniously shoved backward and would have landed on his ass had he not been caught mid-fall.

Caught he is. A powerful arm slips around his neck and he is stretched upright so that his heels are lifted off the floor. His right arm is twisted behind him and he yelps in pain, the tendons in his shoulder scream in agony.

"*Capitano Pazzi.* I've been expecting you." Lecter's voice sinks into his ear like an ice pick. Pazzi almost pisses himself.

"I can't believe he fell for it again." Graham's voice from somewhere close. "You were right."

Graham slowly comes into focus between slits Pazzi struggles to keep opened. He stands massaging his blood streaked right hand as he studies Pazzi with decidedly unsympathetic blue eyes.

“Fate knocked on Rinaldo’s door centuries ago.” Lecter breathes into his ear. “May I call you Rinaldo? We have become rather intimate wouldn’t you agree?”

Pazzi nods and grunts in agreement.

“Rinaldo. Did you really believe that Will, who killed two knife wielding Paolini by himself, men larger and younger than he, would be so easily and quickly subdued by you?”

Pazzi doesn’t answer. He gazes at Graham who stands flexing his knuckles, head tilted thoughtfully to the side and exuding a primal sort of satisfaction evident with each swipe of his tongue along the bruised and bleeding mouth. Graham is not clumsy at all, he is quite agile. He had faked the entire slip and fall routine on the stairs. Pazzi realizes his punches and blows had hardly incapacitated Graham. He had only made Graham…mad.

“Can you um…knock him out with a hold like that?” Graham asks casually.

The arm about his neck squeezes more tightly and Pazzi’s trachea seems to flatten. He shakes his head, gulps in air he doesn’t think quite makes it to his lungs as his chest constricts. He thinks Crawford must be in the palazzo by now. He hopes to God Jack Crawford is creeping down the corridor with his Walther PPK right now.

“Hmmm. That would require a lighter touch than the hold I used on Mason to snap his neck.”

Pazzi hangs helpless in Lecter’s grip, unable to do anything but listen and cringe as the two psychopaths discuss the finer points of manual strangulation.

“Yes. But not quite as…lethal as the hold on Ruggerio.”

“How long do you think?”

Pazzi stares as Graham holds up his index finger, turns it to the side as though pointing to the wall.

“Ah, yes. I think I can manage that.”

“I’ll um, clear the table.”

Pazzi is jerked upwards and as his eyeballs bulge with the pressure of the python-like grip at his throat, Graham’s callous response is the last thing he hears before blackness descends.

Hannibal wheels the last of the oversized canvas tarps into place so that their work station is adequately concealed and the priceless frescoes are protected. Canvas has been unrolled in strips beneath the long dining table, hastily affixed with duct tape but also adequate protection. Hannibal’s main concern is the ceiling.

“I’m not convinced that the ceiling is high enough to avoid splatter and spray.” Hannibal says looking up.

“We’ll just have to exercise restraint.” Will says.

“You will. This one is yours, Will.”

“Mine?”

“I’ve been considering your hallucinations, your inferno. Our…inferno.”

“Our inferno.”

“What affects you, affects me. If you’re not interested…”

“Please…pontificate…I mean articulate.” Will bites his lip, endearingly.

Hannibal raises a brow at the jibe but continues as he arranges the surgical instruments Will needs on the table. He will likely have to leave them here, but surgeon’s tools such as these are not difficult to come by.

“Our actions flow from our thoughts. You wrestle with your…pursuits. Perhaps merely contemplating an act of virtue is not enough. You must complete it.”

“Revenge is not virtuous.” Will says. “Enjoyable perhaps, but not virtuous.”

“As always, it is a matter of perception. When God commits an act of retribution is that virtuous?”

“Never avenge yourself, but leave it to the wrath of God?”

“*Romans*, I think, *Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.*”

“Exactly. It’s not virtuous when we commit an act of revenge. It’s hubris, Hannibal. An offense against God.”

“You are avoiding the question. The nature of the pursuit has changed because the nature of the thing you pursue has changed. You have been putting on the layers of other people all of your life, their values and their expectations. Your true self buried beneath.”

“The nature of my pursuit has not changed.” Will insists, “I have changed.”

“Awakening is change. You’ve been reborn. Hiding behind a mask of perceived virtue all along, just like hiding behind that gun.”

Hannibal nods to Will’s Berretta on the table. He considers Hannibal’s explanation. It is, of course, self-serving as always, but he articulates his argument well.

“I feared the intimacy of killing without the gun. Feared I would enjoy it too much.”

“You didn’t even consider packing your weapon to lure Pazzi just now.” Hannibal points out. “You have become much more intimate with your instincts.”

“That was not always the case.” Will returns.

“Your fear of intimacy was written all over your face the first time we met.” Hannibal says. “Your glasses. Your avoidance of eye contact. Did you understand you were already swimming in an ocean of other people?”

“I…told myself I could stay afloat as long as I swam in my own pool.” Will sighs and picks up a scalpel, runs his finger along its blade. “And then you came along…”

“Is God virtuous when he takes revenge?”

“I don’t know.” Will says, “But he does it all the time.”

The huge wood doors Will had closed immediately after Pazzi had passed out fling open without warning.

“My card won't lock this door.” Hannibal says.

“I wonder why.” Will says peeking out from the curtain of canvas.

“*Ciao? Che é qui dentro?”* A woman’s voice sounds from the entrance, a very annoyed voice.

“That would be the Assistant Curator. Frustrated, middle aged, portly. I think you should handle her.” Hannibal says.

“Fuck…” Will mutters stepping out from the curtains.

The *Signora*’s eyebrows raise in pleasant surprise as Will walks toward her. Will notices the wedding ring, the badge clearly stating her name and her title, and the immaculate mask of make-up she wears even this late with no one around to see it. Hannibal’s assessment of portly is uncharitable and, Will decides, a matter of perception and taste.

She is curvaceous, wide-hipped, not quite Rubenesque, but definitely full figured. She is however, middle aged and frustrated. Will sees her life in the blink of his eyes. She tugs at earrings too elegant and expensive for her salary, the luster of real gold and the glittering of real diamonds sparkle in the light purchased by a husband who earns much more than she does. She spends little time with him, or he with her because the plunging neckline that shows off her assets is a band aid. The dress is pretentious, too brash for a woman her age. She starves for affection, settles for attention, but she longs for validation she never receives. Will imagines her gazing into a full length mirror with a critical eye, determined to show her inattentive husband how attractive she still is, determined to project success and confidence to everyone else. She works long hours, is dedicated above and beyond and for all her efforts, she remains an assistant director passed over for promotion and still working for men no more qualified than she.

“*Tu chi sei*?” She asks Will, drinking him up with her eyes and not bothering to hide the fact.

Will smiles as she asks who he is, hopes his recent beating isn’t too obvious in the dim light, inclines his head in deference and paints an apologetic expression on his face. He tells her he’s new.

“*Sono nuovo qui..Signorina*”

Will watches the eyes crease with amusement and perhaps apprehension, unsure if she should be flattered or offended at being mistaken for an unmarried woman. She folds her arms across her ample bosom and angles her head so she can catch Will’s eyes. He turns his assets up to greet hers, allows his gaze to linger upon the cleavage a second or two longer than necessary before meeting her eyes.

“*Ti abbiamo disturbare*? Will asks thinking he and Hannibal have played with their prey too loudly.

“Yes, you are disturbing me.” she says suddenly switching to English for him, “You’re American, yes?”

“I am.”

“Another grad student, working on your dissertation?”

“Yes.”

“You must be new. You’re polite. I’m *Signora Carbone*. This is my exhibit. No one told me you guys would be working late this evening.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No…it’s just…It would be nice if I was informed.”

Will nods noncommittally, but she reads commiseration and smiles slightly.

“At least you’re working. We’re behind schedule.”

She peers over Will’s shoulder and Will waits, hopes he doesn’t have to stuff her corpse into a closet. He relaxes with relief when she steps back and turns toward the door.

“Just keep it down. Sounded like a boxing match in here. I’m trying to work. Don’t make me come in here again.”

“Will do…*Signora.*”

Will shuts the door behind her and looks to the curtains. He can feel Hannibal peeking through the tarp; he doesn’t have to see him.

“Frustrated.” Hannibal’s voice floats from behind the shroud of madness.

“Very. That was close.”

“If she comes in again…”

“I know.” Will sighs walking over and stepping back inside Pazzi’s theater of horrors.

“Where were we?” Hannibal says.

Will glances up at the ceiling fresco over the doors he just closed. Lorenzo sits with the revered philosophers of his day, flanked by Fame and Virtue, female allegories clothed in Roman stolas, paragons of modesty. Ideals for Lorenzo to cherish and espouse, ideals for Lorenzo to express as he pleased.

“Somewhere between virtue and revenge, I think.”

“This is your canvas, Will. What are you going to paint?” Hannibal says, gazing at Pazzi lying prone on the table.

“An allegory. Inspired by current events and you… my muse.” Will says, reaching for the scissors.

“Classical representation?”

Will gestures at the frescoes, “What else?”

“He’ll be waking up soon.” Hannibal says, unbuckling Pazzi’s belt, “Top and bottom?”

“Can’t have half a canvas.” Will says taking the scissors up the seam of a pant leg.

Pazzi groans and the leg twitches beneath Will’s fingers. The cold metal of the scissors has registered and Pazzi’s head rolls lazily from side to side.

“Duct tape.” Hannibal says holding out his hand.

Will slaps the duct tape into Hannibal’s waiting hands and quickly finishes off the other pant leg while Hannibal administers the muzzle. They work in silence listening to the playful melody of Chopin’s *Nocturne No 4 in F major*.

Will’s hands move over Pazzi with an almost clinical assuredness, fingers plucking at fabric and flesh as though guided by the music. Hannibal stands beside him, lost in the moment watching Will prepare his canvas. An indescribable sense of contentment descends as Will looks up from the bag of blood and breath to gaze into Hannibal’s eyes in what Hannibal can only imagine is a similar contentment.

A most smooth transition.

Hannibal is reminded of Tier laid out on cold metal as Will had cut the clothes from a body stiff with rigor, blanched and broken. The pale blue eyes had moved over the rigid corpse with acute regret, his empathy with Tier complete and consuming. He had struggled to focus, requiring constant prompts from Hannibal, gentle touches to keep him from retreating into his mind.

It is with immeasurable pride that he watches Will now, focused on the task and detached from the body at his fingertips. This is different than Tier. Different than Ruggerio. The Paolini. Even Mason. Will is still evolving, finding himself. Perhaps Hannibal’s most crowning achievement is that Will desires Hannibal to share in it.

Hannibal knows Will’s days in his inferno are numbered. Patience.

Static interrupts the Chopin Nocturne and the fragile mood. Hannibal adjusts the volume on the portable stereo appropriated from one of the offices so he can focus on the walkie talkie, also appropriated from the same office.

“What’s going on?” Will says, shoving Pazzi’s clothes and shoes out of the way under the table, the loud hissing jarring him into entirely different state of consciousness.

Hannibal holds up a finger to wait. He listens carefully to the tinny Italian of the security guard at the main entrance as he exchanges updates with another guard, presumably at the other side of the palazzo judging from their conversation. Their conversation is brief and Hannibal sets the walkie talkie on the table.

“Uncle Jack is here.” Hannibal looks to Pazzi as does Will.

““When it rains it pours.” Will says. “Menelaus and Agamemnon have been conspiring.”

“Interesting.” Hannibal says. “We don’t have much time. Jack will find the appetizer but it will have no context for him.”

“Depends on what Pazzi told him.”

“I wonder what else Uncle Jack knows.” Hannibal says.

“Or thinks he knows.” Will says.

“He came alone. What does that tell you?”

“That Jack…intended to sacrifice Pazzi. And…that Pazzi intended to sacrifice Jack.” Will pauses, “What does it tell you?”

“That we have another guest for dinner.” Hannibal says as he selects a scalpel.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Notes for 86
Will and creature Hannibal quote loosely from Bad Blood, Arthur Rimbaud and from Paradise Lost, John Milton.
Daniel quotes from Dante’s Inferno, Canto VIII
Will quotes from Homer’s Iliad, Book XXIII
Prometheus who longed to know too much…Thus, too much knowing is misery. Lorenzo de’Medici, A Wood of Love: The Golden Age
Will and Hannibal quote from Romans: 12:19

Coming Up: Jack crashes the party. Du Maurier is next on the menu.

Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will take their revenge. Pazzi becomes his worst fear: a murder tableau. Jack wants to surprise Hannibal and Will and they…want to surprise him.

Pazzi opens his mouth to scream but all that escapes are weak grunts. The screaming continues in his head while Lecter talks. Somehow he manages to pay attention as the dreamy far away feeling returns and he feels a sense of calm with the floating. He decides he won't look at Graham or what he is doing.

"Rinaldo…That's right. Don't look at Will. I asked if you talked to Jack Crawford."

"Allegra…" His wife's name slips from his lips like drool as he rolls his eyes at Hannibal.

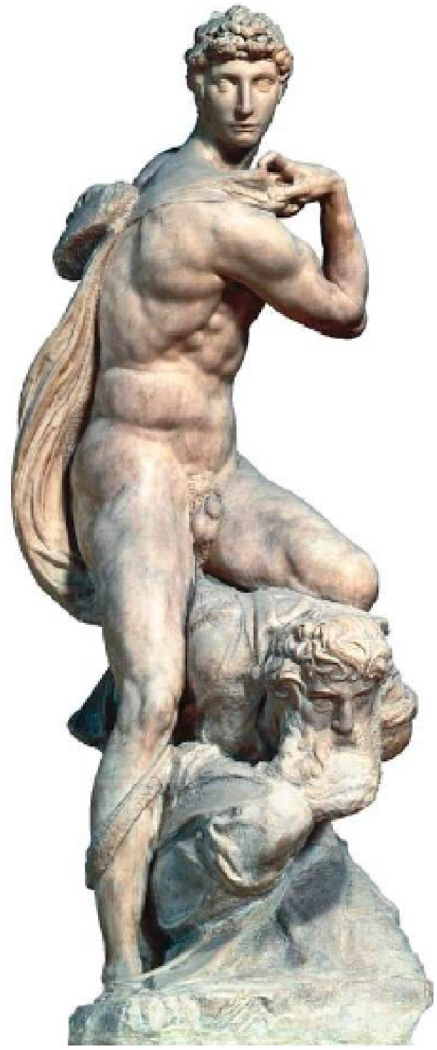
"She's not here. She never was. She's with the FBI. In Siena."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 87

Hannibal and Will take their revenge. Pazzi becomes his worst fear: a murder tableau. Jack wants to surprise Hannibal and Will and they…want to surprise him.



Genius of Victory , Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1532

Patroclus, slaughter in his heart, chased them down…Between the ships, the high wall, and the river, he put them to the slaughter, avenging many a dead Danaan. There he killed Pronous first with a throw of his bright spear, taking him in the chest exposed by his shield, and loosening his limbs so he fell with a thud. Then he rushed at Thestor, son of Enops who crouched in his gleaming chariot, his mind and senses lost, and the reins slipped from his hands. Patroclus struck him on the right of his jaw with the spear, driving it past the teeth, and pulling its shaft back dragged him over the chariot's rim, like a man astride a jutting rock landing a mighty fish hooked on the end of his line.

Iliad, Book XVI

Previously…

"There are cameras throughout the Palazzo, Will. Not in every room or stairwell, but there are many. There will be no ambiguity, no claims of coercion nor cover from the FBI, no…hiding who you are this time."

The pale blue eyes are wide and clear as Will gazes back at him. "*Let not my bones be laid apart from yours, Achilles*."

Hannibal holds the curls and face he loves a moment longer and thinks it another gift that Will says such perfect things and means them.

The perfect lips seize the moment drifting upon the current of charged air to close the scant space between God and his beloved Adam, bruised petals brush over Hannibal's mouth the taste sublime and made all the sweeter knowing the flutter of mortal pain it causes Will to bestow the gift. As Hannibal wrings his pleasure from the inflamed flesh that breaks upon his teeth he marvels how he managed the better part of a year without the touch of these fevered blooms. The time between leaving Will at the grove of fig trees and greeting him at the palazzo has left him ravenous.

The floor above beckons and Hannibal draws away, reluctant as perhaps Will to part flesh. The imminent parting of other flesh corrupted though it is grows closer as does the chaos that will follow. The blue eyes blink as Will lets him go, wonderment apparent in the tranquil sea there, the veils of deceit between them ripped away, neither used to the other's stark nakedness as they stand staring at each other.

Beethoven's Fifth, still in the first movement, plays softly as Hannibal takes to the steps, the echo of Will's footsteps scraping softly, falling synchronous behind him as they were always meant to be.

Will presses raw lips together, smiles despite the fiery abrasions as the devil's cursed kiss lingers, his fingers trailing along the railing to keep his mind from wandering.

"I noticed the cameras have been mounted as unobtrusively as possible, surveillance seems focused on entrances and certain works of art." Will says.

"Yes. Unlike the Uffizi, the palazzo is literally covered with art from ceilings to floors, unsightly and potentially damaging security is concentrated on the areas open to the public."

"No live feed?" It's meant rhetorically, just in case Hannibal is contemplating a sin of omission he has deemed inconsequential.

"Not where we'll be. The Mezzanine perhaps. It contains priceless pieces in glass, the rooms restored to perfection and perhaps secured with motion detectors. The entrances to the palazzo on the ground floor have a live feed. And the bridge you took from the Uffizi to get here. There's a control room in the Uffizi, live feed there as you say, but not here."

"You know where the cameras are?"

"Most, not all. The performance won't be captured on film much to the disappointment of law enforcement."

Hannibal strides through the entrance into the *Sala dei Cinquecento* sniffs the air, stale, cooled now in the absence of warm bodies cluttering its expansive polished floor to gawk at the ceiling above through the tiny screens glued to their faces, mind palaces contained in their phones instead of their heads. Aware that Will passed through the hall on his way down, Hannibal knows he saw the murals and ceiling panels, but he did not really look at them. Hannibal has longed to stand in the great hall with Will to view Vasari's majestic memorial to Cosimo I without distraction to diminish the experience. All of the splendor will be absorbed, captured forever in the labyrinth that is Will's imagination.

He leaves Will gazing up, allowing him unfettered space from which to indulge himself, mindful that his own presence intrudes upon the visceral visions dancing before Will's eyes. Hannibal finds himself trying to imagine what it is like for Will to walk through a museum and thinks of Will perusing the *objets d'art* at his home in Baltimore, eyes and fingers lingering over each piece as he had studied them, his mind filled with images as the vines of associations had sprouted in his skull. As Will gazes up, Hannibal wonders what Will's imagination conjures as he muses on the parade of images above.

He takes up a comfortable position at the back of the hall, hands clasped in front shifting his weight, testing the loss of sensation in the wounded leg. The exhibition of Cinquecento opulence pales beside the slender form in the baggy jumpsuit who's every movement steals center stage. Will removes the glasses and performs a single leisurely rotation, face upturned so sharply that he has to grasp the cap to keep it from falling off.

"It's beautiful. How many paintings are up there?"

"Thirty-nine panels. The designs are Vasari's the work by his students."

"A celebration of Cosimo's life." Will says pausing to add dryly, "A master of self-promotion."

Hannibal follows Will's finger pointed upward to the center panel of the ceiling, Cosimo I enshrined in apotheosis.

"Cosimo had to choose between an allegory of Florence or a portrait for the center panel. But, don't judge Cosimo too harshly." Hannibal says lifting a finger in warning, "Greatness is measured by one's legacy. Individual achievement but one pillar of Humanism. Fame was a virtue, a worthy earthly endeavor."

"To impugn or steal another's fame tantamount to a sin inviting retribution." Will rolls his eyes to Hannibal thinking of Abel Gideon. "Like taking the credit for creation from a very jealous god."

I'd like to talk to you about the Chesapeake Ripper.

Thought I was the Chesapeake Ripper.

No, you are the pretender to the throne.

"An egregious sin. Poor Abel. Not entirely to blame. He had some help from a rather feisty tongue."

"That feisty tongue keeps wagging to his editor and the FBI. I think Frederick has a bone to pick with you." Will turns from the ceiling to Hannibal.

"And I with him. Ah Frederick." Hannibal's tone borders on wistful. "Back in his chair at BSHCI?"

"Complacently preparing another book in anticipation of our arrival."

"Ours? Still the strutting peacock, isn't he?"

"Sycophantic."

“Not to Jack. Purnell?”

“I’m sure he’s been keeping tabs on events here and ingratiating himself to Purnell by confirming everything she wants to hear about Jack.”

“Jack has to know.”

“Of course he does. Mason had Purnell on speed dial and so does Frederick. Interpol, too. Jack has to bring you home on a platter to avoid the fire waiting for him.”

“Uncle Jack kept her in the dark. She didn’t know what he was up to until it was too late. By then, you were already here. Jack has placed her in the indelicate position of having to back him up to save face. Cover her incompetence and lack of proper oversight.”

“Jack has nothing to lose.”

Will looks meaningfully to Hannibal, the implications obvious without another word. He shifts his attention to the moment, looks around the dim hall to the murals depicting Florence’s battles, the intended association between Cosimo and the portrayals of a proud and victorious Florence undeniable. It is impossible to imagine Florence without the Medici. The family’s mark upon the city is eternal.

“The feud between Pazzi and Medici wasn’t about fame; it was about jealousy.” Will says scratching at his neck certain the detergent has given him a rash.

“Jealousy at its most virulent. Not even a marriage between the families could appease Pazzi pride too long maligned by the Medici. Robbed of their coffers and robbed of earthly recognition. Their tool of perception pointed at one end.”

Will thinks of the contemporary Pazzi on his way. Jealousy would seem to loom large in Pazzi’s calculus as well. The mirrors Will sees when he looks at Pazzi are inflated illusions. Will thinks the defective tool must be a family trait. Pazzi measures greatness with that most masculine of yardsticks…his dick. Will imagines it must be frustrating to always come up short.

“Always eclipsed by Medici. Florentine politics were particularly cutthroat.” Will nods thinking of the author who inspired his inferno. “Dante was exiled for his politics.”

“As a Florentine in exile, his reputation tarnished, his property seized, Dante was especially sensitive to that particular offense. No surprise it figures prominently in his *Divine Comedy.*”

“A carefully navigated theme in his *Inferno*.” Will says. “Treachery commands a harsh punishment.”

“So it does.” Hannibal’s voice is hushed, swallowed up in the vacuous hall.

“Did.” Will whispers, hand already poised above the thick layers of fabric to cradle the silver scar out of habit until he realizes he feels no angry pulse threading across his flesh and wonders if this is what forgiveness feels like.

“Dante was not without sin.” Hannibal says watching Will carefully, “His pilgrimage from hell to paradise an expression of classic *commedia*, beginning with his descent into confusion and culminating with his acceptance of God’s enigmatic nature.”

Will fingers his pockets, skims a loafer along the floor and the polished surface takes on the aspect of ice, his frozen lake called Cocytus.

“Dante wrote it in exile.” Will says, thinking exile very close to exclusion, the difference a matter of degrees. “His acceptance of God’s nature corresponded to his acceptance of his sentence, a parallel paradigmatic shift. His fate to never see Florence again. He finished it the same year he died.”

“In exile. His actions had caused his exile and every moment he likened to being in hell. Your hallucinations are not incidental, Will. Like Dante, you are lost in the dark wood of your own design. Both you and Dante are traveler and navigator, pilgrim and poet. As the author of your own odyssey, you already know how the journey ends.”

“Doesn’t feel like it.”

Will’s shoulders fold, a miserable shrug that tears at Hannibal’s heart. Will’s becoming has been an agonizing process and acceptance is not instantaneous. Will says he wants Hannibal’s gift. He accepts with his words and actions, but he must feel it, too. Will’s reason has accepted his becoming but his emotions wrestle still. His hallucinations shaped by the physicality of his waking world, Will believes he lingers in his Cocytus and so the fires of his imagination still burn in his inferno. Trust has bloomed in the garden Hannibal has made and Hannibal thinks he can help his confused cub see his way out of his inferno and into the garden.

“Your odyssey takes pages from his. How did Dante escape?”

Will tugs at the scratchy collar remembering a similar conversation with Daniel. “Virgil carries him on his back as they climb down Satan and emerge to see the stars.”

“That’s how he escapes the Inferno as you seem to have escaped yours.”

“Have I?” Will continues to gaze at Hannibal avoiding the dark corners of the hall.

“Dante’s journey did not end with the stars. He climbed with Virgil to Purgatory.”

“Are you suggesting Daniel has been my Virgil?”

“Has he? He’s been your companion outside your inferno looking in though you have given him an identity within it. Or, as Daniel would probably insist, he represents a Jungian archetype.”

“Not entirely sold on that, are you?”

“Daniel’s interpretation shines a light into those dark places in your mind, but you require more than his singular torch for illumination. Virgil was Dante’s guide within his inferno. As author of the *Aeneid*, it is no mystery from where Dante drew his inspiration.”

“Virgil wrote for Rome and his emperor. Dante admired him, like a good Humanist he found common ground with the learned pagan.”

“Dante refers to Virgil as master, teacher. A role I think it fair to say never crossed your mind for Daniel.”

The dark eyes hold Will’s gaze, the subtle arching of brows as gentle as the jibe Will decides to let pass. Will thinks Virgil has been conspicuously absent from his inferno. If anyone, he has cast

Hannibal in that role. A curious amalgamation of adversary and confidant. Alternately Satan and God.

You feel discontent because the nature of your pursuit has changed or because the nature of the thing you pursue has changed?

“It’s a relevant question to ask how you see Daniel.” Hannibal says, glancing about the hall with his usual vigilance. “You can’t shove your feelings for him into one of your convenient little forts.”

“My little forts aren’t what they used to be.” Will says curtly, feeling the protective prickling Hannibal’s attentions to Daniel always seem to elicit.

“Your feelings shape your mindscape and his function within it. You are, of course too close to see him objectively. And, despite his best efforts, he does not see objectively either. He felt too much of you, Will. He empathized and assimilated. Separation was painful, wasn’t it?”

“Is.” Will says simply. “What do you see?”

Hannibal nods, the ache of separation not unknown to him. The pain is necessary. It is only through separation that we realize what we are missing. He chooses his words carefully. Will must arrive where Hannibal leads on his own.

“We agree your hallucinations are affected by your waking world.”

“Seem to be. You know, I um…talk to you in my head. You’re not always popping in here as a hallucination. I suppose I conjure up my imago of you.”

“Force of habit. I’m in your head as you once said. How else could you have ensnared me so convincingly?”

Will holds his gaze for a second then, typically looks away in avoidance. Whether he turns to avoid looking into Hannibal’s face or to prevent Hannibal from looking into his is difficult to know.

“I can’t remember what it’s like not to think of you, think…like you.” Will says, distracting himself with the texture of his uniform.

“Nor I, you. Would it surprise you to know that I have taken you with me down every street I have walked in Florence? That I have shown you every flower in my garden? That I have eaten every meal with you at my table and awakened to you each morning?”

Hannibal stops realizing the effect his words have wrought. He thinks, knows Will has never looked at him quite as wide-eyed as this. Will immediately looks aside, swallows what Hannibal imagines is a huge lump of embarrassment. The awkward plucking at the baggy uniform charms Hannibal to no end.

“I did surprise you.” Hannibal says, smoothing the creases from his wrinkled sleeves.

“The surprise was that you told me.”

Will’s voice cracks softly disintegrating like a handful of autumn leaves in the wind. Words Hannibal would hold in his hand if he could catch them.

“Each of us carries his imago of the other.” Hannibal pauses as his words too are lost to the vast hall, gears shifting in his mind and he steers Will’s thoughts back to the path he must follow.

“You experienced a significant paradigmatic shift since the slaughter house. You want the garden. But Dante did not immediately find himself in Paradise did he?”

“No…he didn’t. Dante and Virgil parted company in Purgatory.” Will frowns, “So, I’m in Purgatory. Well, that’s progress…”

“Your mind is fractured, Will. Your need to be whole is reflected in its fragments. I have every confidence the garden will come. Patience is a virtue.”

Will thinks his mind has been fractured a long time. He has never quite picked up all the pieces left in the wake of Hannibal’s initial shattering of his psyche. He is fully aware he replaced some of the pieces with willfully selected morsels from the smorgasbord Hannibal had laid out for him upon his release from BSHCI. And he had followed Hannibal to Florence for the rest.

Will also thinks he has been very patient. Patience is not the virtue he currently seeks. He thinks Hannibal may be correct about Purgatory. It’s where souls prepare for Paradise. Souls full of sin, but contrite spirits granted the opportunity to correct their mistakes. A very literal purging of the soul.

“Purgatory looks very much like my waking world.” Will says, “It takes the shape of places I know and I um…interact with my infernal companions there.”

“How did Dante arrive at the Gates of Purgatory?”

It seems like ages rather than weeks that he had this same discussion with Daniel over the kitchen table, gazing at Daniel’s garden beyond the patio.

“After he leaves the Inferno with Virgil, they sleep at the foot of the mountain. He dreams himself there. Carried by an eagle. *I imagined I saw an eagle in a dream poised in the sky on outstretched wings…*”

Will stops with the sudden dizziness the verse brings. He stares at the floor as white wisps of clouds swirl at his feet across the ice and a spray of feathers erupts inside his clothes delicious and cool upon his skin, a shiver of satin between his legs. He closes his eyes against the tide of vertigo that grips him as Hannibal finishes the verse for him.

“And I seemed to be there when Ganymede left his own, snatched up by Jupiter.”

Hannibal notes that Will keeps his distance, fingers tremulously folded into fists he keeps to his side and he begins to pace as he used to in his office, wearing a path in his carpets before the red and white drapes when his thoughts had poured like an oil spill pooling into the bone arena his skull flowing more quickly than he could articulate.

“Carried to the Sphere of Fire, guided by...Lucia. Been dreaming of giant eagles have you?” Hannibal says as lashes flutter in startled response.

Will’s thoughts fly like the eagle of his dreams, associations swarm and Will struggles against the noisy hum to remain in the moment with Hannibal, this Hannibal, even as he imagines grasping glossy plumes suspended over a sapphire sea. He blinks several times but a blustery chill ripples through his hair as the giant beak scrapes along his scalp. Creature Hannibal whispers again into his neck the same verses spoken as his clothes had been ripped from him in the sun filled sky.

Life to my thoughts within your heart is given. My words begin to breathe upon your breath.

Like to the moon am I, that cannot shine alone…

The dark luminous eyes sweep over him and Will shudders inside the layers of clothes, stripped naked in that steady gaze all over again and not entirely sure his thoughts are entirely his.

How can either of us know if what I feel is me…or you?

You'll never know, Will. I'll never know.

How can you…tolerate not knowing?

That's the beauty of it.

The horror of it.

"You have taken many forms as our relationship has evolved." Will says thinking of his ravenstag and antler crowned wendigo.

He stares down into the floating panes of ice at his winged reflection and the shadow shrouded form of his infernal companion rising behind him. The same glittering amber that glows in the creature's eyes is mirrored in his own.

"Zeus' enormous eagle only one of them. When I hallucinated in the stream while we bathed, it wasn't Cocytus was it? Eunoe?" Will says, lifting his head from the lake of melting ice to Hannibal.

"Or Lethe. Are you trying to forget your sins or remind yourself of your virtues?"

I told you to look for the good in Hannibal so you could find it in yourself. You see yourself as a bad person because the creature in your inferno is a reflection of you.

Will considers his waking dream while bracing himself against the current of the stream, his anchor on the bank, his paddle at his fingertips. Will knows that like the stream his narratives flow toward a destination and it is he who has made the water murky. Will studies his paddle from across the gleaming floor and imagines he steps through thawing ice on his way up Mount Purgatory.

He walks slowly, shakes off the melancholy that threatens to dampen his spirits. "I'm still chasing nightmares."

"We're born to fly upward, Will. *Wherefore at a little wind dost thou so fall*?"

Will grins at the warmth Hannibal's cheery chiding engenders. "*This is no time to be shut up in your own thoughts, unheeding.*"

"*What a difference between these trails and those of Hell…*"

"*Here, every entrance fills with joyous song and there with savage wails*."

Will completes the verse and turns a buttery smile on Hannibal as the chill of his lake lessens with every step.

“Does God feel the thrill of anticipation?”

“He hears thunderous applause.” Hannibal beams back.

“Of course he does. What is that statue you’re standing next to? Has to be a Michelangelo.” Will says slipping the glasses back in place.

“It is. Michelangelo was an ardent admirer of Dante, dedicated sonnets to him.”

The mention of sonnets should resonate with Will evoking memories of a chilly morning spent curled up beneath warm woolen blankets while breakfast and coffee had cooled downstairs. Will walks toward him with hands stuffed in pockets eyes riveted to the floor ever caught between dreams as he traverses his dark wood. Musky sweetness hangs in the air as he takes up beside Hannibal to admire the larger than life sculpture.

“A later work of his isn’t it? Very different from his *David*. The human body can’t really twist like that.”

“Exaggeration and asymmetry create tension, an emotional dissonance Michelangelo’s early figures did not achieve. A personal style he developed on his own referred to as *terribilità.”*

*“*What’s it called?” Will asks; his hands lured from the depths of his pockets by the sensuousness of the gleaming stone to touch the lustrous marble figures.

“*Genius of Victory.”* Hannibal’s eyes roam over the marble figures he has adopted as his own personal allegory of Fate and he reverently whispers the title in Michelangelo’s native tongue. *“Genio della Vittoria”*

Will notices the hushed tone Hannibal adopts but doesn’t comment.

“An allegory of Florentine independence?” He presses his lips in thought, “Humanist brilliance? Michelangelo was a Florentine, always thumbing his nose at the Church in Rome.”

Brows hitch as Will studies the piece. His slender fingers follow the contour of carved flesh along the bared leg of the youthful nude poised over the bowed and bent figure of the much older male he straddles. The buffed stone ripples with muscle and veins, the cool flesh at his fingertips glossy smooth unlike the roughly hewn form contorted into submission beneath one thick muscular thigh. The bearded visage of the bent figure stares into space a mask of sorrowful resignation.

The pale blue eyes track the curve of the youth’s body to stare up into the serene face, the noble head covered of course, with a crown of curls.

“He thumbed his nose at the Medici, too. Well, the later Medici; Lorenzo he saw through a child’s eyes. Neither is it a tribute to his beloved city.” Hannibal says stepping closer to rest his hand upon Will’s shoulder, “But easily interpreted as such. This…is a confession chiseled in stone, a declaration of subjugation and love.”

Will raises a brow. “Subjugation?”

“Willful subjugation. *Love takes me captive, by beauty bound, I lie…”*

Hannibal's hand stirs beside his neck and dust stirs beneath Will's feet along hardwood; it glitters in the air as Will pushes open the door to Hannibal's bedroom in Baltimore and he squints at the two silhouettes caught in the glare of morning sun as they lounge beneath the sheets and blankets, Hannibal leaning against the headboard and he nestled in Hannibal's lap listening to a throaty recitation of early morning poetry. In Italian… Dante, then Michelangelo.

Will gnaws at the bottom lip he can't seem to leave alone. His eyes wander over the figures as his mind wades through the verses swimming in his head. As Hannibal intended he should.

"The old man is Michelangelo and the muscular youth is Cavalieri." Will nods toward the finely sculpted genitalia. "Though Victory seems a little um, uninspired."

The invisible string from Will's unpredictable mouth to Hannibal's lips twitches.

"You are familiar with Classical aesthetics as my own drawings will attest. Particularly of you. Greek art is expressed in ideals and size imparted an ideal." Hannibal gestures to the figures. "Michelangelo's figures are oversized to appear god-like; man of course made in God's image.

"Small and uncircumcised was…more tasteful?" Will says catching the lift of Hannibal's brow as he rolls his eyes back to the statue for another appraising glance. "Your drawings of me deviate from the ideal."

"A compromise. Too large or hairy risks becoming a joke like Priapus or a beast like a satyr. Erect is unspeakably vulgar. Too diminutive is unnatural and unseemly. Your physical form was rendered accurately, but most of the hair was left on your head."

Michelangelo did not impose a design upon the marble; he released it.

With a chisel.

The chisel was merely the tool of his desire.

Hannibal's persistent allusions to Michelangelo are not random, Will decides, smiling slightly as he caresses the marble. Hannibal's pencil had released his design upon paper as Michelangelo had taken his chisel to stone and he is drawing Will's attention to this singular act of mortal creation through poetry and the associations embedded deep within Will's subconscious.

I'll tell you this – a closer look at his drawings and his sources of inspiration will tell you a lot.

Eager for Adam to rejoin him in the garden, God is guiding his creation out of Purgatory. Will lifts his eyes from the statue to the undaunted deity standing at his side and the shade of his blonde Achilles moves across the stark features.

"This sonnet in stone was carved the year they met. Victory's genius was passive, an unwitting triumph."

Hannibal's voice floats through Will's head. The blonde brows tick up lost in the windswept braids, dark eyes aflame.

"Do you remember the rest of the stanza?"

Always testing him it seems, Will shakes his head until his blonde Achilles fades. He scratches self-consciously behind his ear.

“*My only hope, my assurance too, is there in your glance, affectionate..rueful…true*. Are we talking salience or salacity?”

The pale blue eyes roll up, hopeful, Hannibal decides as the string twitches again, for the latter. Hannibal touches a finger to lips that split into a grin.

“Honest inquiry or irreverence? Where you are concerned all is salient; the degree of salacity, as always, is left to you. Salience will come as the symphony we write grows more harmonious. We should leave Michelangelo to his rocks…”

The grin grows wider beneath the insistent fingers and Will thinks Hannibal especially rascally. He’s feeling a little rascally himself.

“…and Cosimo to his fame and tend to our own.” Hannibal finishes.

Hannibal brushes his nose alongside the cap digging deeply into the tufts of unruly curls that refuse to stay put and smiles for the camera mounted inconspicuously above. Will nudges the nose aside, feigning impatience and swaggers off only to halt. He turns with a puckish pucker of lips as he realizes he doesn’t know where they are going.

“Straight down that corridor. The room of Cosimo the Elder leads to Lorenzo’s room.” Hannibal says mentally applauding Will’s newfound enthusiasm.

“The doors are all unlocked?”

Will has not had to use the key card since he entered *Palazzo Vecchio*. He had found it taped to the wall in plain sight next to the exit from the Uffizi. Hannibal had left it there knowing he would need it to access the bridge and enter *Palazzo Vecchio* from the other side. He reaches into a pocket and withdraws the key card, holds it out intending to return it.

“That one is yours.” Hannibal looks down at Will’s extended hand.

“You have two?” Will huffs, “You couldn’t have given it to me before?”

“Much more fun to find it as you did, wasn’t it? It’s a clone of a clone.”

“Meaning you didn’t know if it would work, so you left it for me.”

Will stuffs it back into the pocket unwilling to let on he had enjoyed finding the blatant token slapped to the wall.

“You’re very resourceful, Will. My faith in you is well placed.”

Hannibal brushes past Will into the room of Cosimo the Elder. There is no overhead light here, or anywhere else in the palazzo. High powered flood lamps illuminate walls and ceilings even during daylight and the harsh lighting is reflected off the glossy surfaces; a particularly troublesome feature when trying to take a photo. Hannibal had rearranged the lamps earlier and had turned the powerful beams to the floor.

It’s a small room by comparison and at the moment seems especially cramped, temporarily crammed with restored furniture, period drapes and linens, tapestries and rugs, and several mannequins in various stages of undress. The boxes of costumes stacked beside the frozen figures corralled near the wall must have recently arrived Will thinks as he touches the loose fabric trailing the limbs of the closest mannequin.

"You can bring her with us." Hannibal says opening the double doors to the next chamber.

"Is she poseable?" Will inspects the oversized doll more closely, thoughts whirling as Hannibal's design unfolds.

"Under other circumstances I would find that question highly amusing. Especially from you." Hannibal enjoys the bewilderment that quickly melts into the familiar frown.

"This is not the only doll you've been playing with." Will says absently as he hefts the mannequin over his shoulder before following Hannibal.

"You're referring to Lounds and Du Maurier?"

Hannibal walks into the larger and brighter room of *Lorenzo il Manifico*, the chosen stage for this particular drama.

"Are there others?"

"Not presently. You may set *Signora Pazzi* at the far end of the table while I attend to the curtains."

Hannibal wonders at the odd expression on Will's face as he heads toward the array of panels strung with painter's tarps hung like surgical drapes to protect the murals. The smell of cleanser hangs crisp in the air to mingle with the scent of wood polish. The panels teeter on the tiny wheels as Hannibal rolls one across the floor, arranges it behind the chair intended for the scantily clad mannequin Will has slung over his shoulder like a beam of lumber.

Music hums from the portable stereo sitting on the floor, Hannibal's predilection for a suitable soundtrack of musical accompaniment persists.

Every time the Ripper kills someone, it's theater.

Will thinks the Scarlatti pretentious and hopes Hannibal brought something else. He notices a walkie talkie next to the stereo. Will examines the room with a critical eye, taking inventory and calculating its dimensions. Familiarity and preparation will make all the difference once Pazzi arrives. Probably Jack, too.

Will isn't sure how he feels about Jack. His perception of Jack has evolved; Jack's own actions have contributed to Will's current ambivalence but Jack has always been viewed from different places in his head. Jack had visited him in the hospital and BSHCI, the weight of responsibility evident in every line of his face. Jack's overtures of friendship had been genuine and, Will knows, were often muddled with guilt or worse, pity. His hand always extended with a helping of good ol' FBI opportunism. The anticipation of regret is a low hanging cloud though a breeze of indifference threatens to blow the billowing wisps of hesitation away. He tells himself Jack has been willing to sacrifice him all along. Jack's attempts at intervention seem largely obligatory now though Will understands Jack's feelings about him had been conflicted, difficult for even Jack to pin down.

Can I borrow your imagination?

I'm not your father, Will.

Have I broken you? Your fear makes you rude, Will.

You need a ride?

Hannibal thinks you are his man in the room. I think you're mine…

Jack is still conflicted and hopelessly confused about what is happening. Will can use either or both of those.

He tucks thoughts of Jack away and continues his perusal of *La Sala di Lorenzo il Magnifico*. There are several tables draped with protective canvas cloths easy to transform into a single exceptionally long dining table. A couple of ornately carved chairs have been set by the large recessed windows Hannibal has opened and Will walks over, pushes the heavy casement windows wide and looks out over the artificially lit courtyard below. It is, predictably empty this time of night and not a particularly theatrical place from which to dangle their prey.

The portable protective panels are quite large, they extend a foot or more over Will's head and have been scattered about the room to protect the wall murals from the polish and cleansers and from fading with all the additional lighting. Will can imagine the completed effect of the Medici dining experience the museum hopes to recreate. The mannequins will be outfitted in full costume inviting the diner to adopt one of the identities as they share a meal with the Medici, those roles played by actual people.

The fare selected by the museum cannot compare with the rare and exquisite dish being served this evening. Pazzi will discover too late that the joy on the menu refers not to his wife but the gastronomic triumph that his flesh will become. Will expects Hannibal will take their meal to go.

He deposits the doll in the delicately carved chair that seems to Will far too lovely to actually sit on. The entire room is unbelievably ornate and Will finds himself imaging dining here centuries ago, unfazed by the works of art covering the walls and ceilings because having one's palatial domicile decorated by the local artists was commonplace. He imagines the floor littered with scraps of food, dogs beneath the table and stains of Florentine cuisine left by oily fingers beneath the patina covered door jambs and window frames, the grunts and poetry of life smeared all over the room if he looked closely enough.

"Lorenzo and his family did not live in the palazzo." Hannibal says noting the distant look in Will's eyes. "Cosimo I dedicated these rooms to his ancestors when he took up residence here. During Lorenzo's time the palazzo functioned as the seat of government.

"The *Signoria."* Will looks up, "This was the hall of Florentine justice."

"And commerce." Hannibal adds. "Conducted in the second courtyard, the Customs as it was known. Not coincidental that the Renaissance and banking began in Florence."

"I suppose it wouldn't be a stretch to find a similar parallel with you." Will raises a brow as he casts his rod, curious if Hannibal will bite or jiggle the line some more.

Hannibal inclines his head toward the cluster of curtained panels, the simple prompt enough to cause Will to drop the arms folded across his chest. With a bemused smirk Will ambles over to the panels, selects one and guides it across the glossy floor to the table. Hannibal decides to allow Will's hook to sink into meat this time.

“I experienced a rebirth here.” Hannibal allows. “My appreciation of the arts and the wisdom of acquiring assets were cultivated here. But, I was alone in my garden; appetites indulged privately.”

Will imagines similar indulgences all over Europe. Unsolved cases no doubt shocking and perplexing, law enforcement in each region playing host to a Ripper they imagined all their own. At some point the United States beckoned with either opportunity or refuge, or both. He found his professional niche and he loosened his tie with Du Maurier. Will does not need to know the specific s of Hannibal’s relationship nor his commercial arrangement with Du Maurier. An acknowledgment of her intended destination would however, be appreciated.

“You share a passcode protected account. Somehow, you got her code and she thinks she has yours. But she can’t leave with the FBI looking for her. Where is she off to…Cayman’s or Zurich?”

“Zurich and from there she expects to take possession of a particularly prime piece of real estate in Provence.” Hannibal pushes another panel in place.

“And how might sending Cassandra to the viper impact on those expectations?”

“What have you and the little mouse imagined?” Hannibal asks pausing to flip Will’s visor up so he can look into the eyes that spark behind the thick glasses.

Will traces a finger along the high backed chair, flagrantly caressing one of the sleek wooden knobs that protrude at the top as he assumes Du Maurier’s perspective upon finding Lounds at her door. It is not difficult to imagine the scene given Du Maurier’s predilections and past behavior.

“The viper slipped into her swan disguise as you hoped she would, while our caustic Cassandra sipped at poisoned wine served with softly spoken lies, drifting quietly into the blissful slumber of her own demise.”

“That is one possibility.” Hannibal knows Will has more than one poetic scenario in mind.

“Or…” Will waves a dismissive hand, “Cassandra did not enter the viper’s temple and tattled to Menelaus instead.”

“That is also a possibility. I told her to take Jack along. Just in case she didn’t, I sent Jack a message, practically drew him a map.”

“Like the invitation you sent to Pazzi.” Will says, “Hera forgets Zeus courts the Fates. Busy with Lounds or busy with Jack. Either way, you need to keep her in Florence so that she doesn’t learn you already cleaned her out.” Will says definitively.

Hannibal leans in for a whiff of curls. “Clever boys. The two of you together I think could be rather dangerous. And I didn’t clean her out.”

“Not from here you can’t. You both have to be there in person to close the account or show up with the code and the death certificate.”

“I transferred what was mine.” Hannibal winks. “Or close enough. I can take the rest anytime. Already have the deceased’s paperwork.”

“You’ve been setting her up since you arrived in Florence. You stopped me from killing her at your villa because you hadn’t wrapped the present yet.”

“Difficult to keep surprises from you.”

“Surprises sometimes don’t work out as we would like.” Will says, eyes softening with memories that cause him to turn his head.

Hannibal ruffles the curls behind an ear in an acknowledgement of shared associations and Will leans into his hand lifting soulful eyes to his. With that single glance the gaping wound Will had dealt his heart throbs anew and Hannibal welcomes the wound. For this there is no cure except to let Eros’ searing arrows sink deeper still into his heart.

That Achilles’ heel is indeed most inconvenient.

“I have only to make a phone call and Bedelia’s imagined coup will disintegrate.” Hannibal says reassuringly into Will’s upturned face, “Bedelia has not been communicating with Banque Suisse for several days.”

Will does not doubt Hannibal’s confidence and thinks Hannibal hired some pretty savvy help, but his design is clear enough.

“When she realizes she has been talking to a phantom there will not be enough wine in all of Italy to console her.”

“I don’t know about that. You haven’t seen her wine cellar. Bedelia has already abandoned the guest cottage in Fiesole. I suspect the unwrapping will be in Siena.”

“Siena.” Will says, “She can pack as many suitcases as she wants. Jack isn’t going to allow her to leave Italy without a deal on the table.” Will pauses, looks deeper into luminous black orbs and sees the cat that swallowed the canary.

Hiding and revealing identity is a constant theme throughout the Greek epics.

“But you sent Lounds to arouse Hera’s whimsy, didn’t you.”

Will stares at the murals along the ceiling and noticing that every one of the female figures is blonde, Hannibal’s design unfurls in Will’s’ mind. He sees Du Maurier in an airport terminal, fresh off her flight from Air France walking carefully in ridiculously high heeled boots and short skirt, sporting long crimson tresses, the spirals bouncing from beneath her wide brimmed hat as she heads toward the nearest bar having barely begun to celebrate on the plane. It’s a vision Du Maurier has been entertaining for weeks. Hannibal merely tinted her vision with ginger. And alerted Jack.

“Bedelia has killed Francesca Dumont. “

“And Ms. Lounds has provided the body this time.”

“There is a certain irony to that.” Will admits. “Whatever Jack finds in Fiesole was intended to convince the authorities the body is Dumont. Thanks to you, Jack won’t assume he is looking at Du Maurier. He’ll be suspicious. But, she’ll have to mutilate the body. Has Bedelia ever killed anyone? Besides that one patient?”

“She prefers moving her pieces around a psychological playground without any sense of urgency. Usually they kill themselves or someone else.”

“Manufactured insight. You two must have had quite the practice together.”

"For a time."

"Bedelia doesn't have time to manufacture or persuade this time."

"She likes setting fires." Hannibal says, "The figurative and the literal kind. Like the one that consumed your former residence."

"I figured as much." Will mumbles, "Playing with matches stems from abuse. At least in boys. Most arsonists experienced sexual abuse as children."

"A diagnosis I could never fully endorse without more information on her. She does present as highly controlling and she is woefully uncomfortable with spontaneity."

"She must have other charms." Will says as fingers tug his hair. "Hates surprises so she plans for every contingency."

"She thinks she does. Uncle Jack will be able to confirm whether or not Bedelia succumbed to whimsy as you so charmingly put it."

"Her words, not mine." Will says, "She told Jack and me that, wait…let me get this right.

Hannibal can get lost in self-congratulation at his own exquisite taste and cunning. Whimsy. That will be how he will get caught."

Hannibal inhales deeply and the dark eyes flicker, a menacing flame Will knows well. "Clever girl. Told you exactly what you wanted to hear. Bedelia does not recognize her own shortcomings."

"She's become complacent, convinced of her invulnerability. You've let her think she has the keys to the kingdom. Practically handed them to her. Too enamored with the prize to see the trap."

"As she believes I am too enamored with you to see hers. Bedelia believes she is the smartest person in the room."

Hannibal reaches for the neck still bearing the raw rings of resistance and pulls his Patroclus close. "She endeavored to rob me of the thing I hold most dear. I intend no less in return."

The warm hand splayed upon his throat slips to his collarbone, caressing the soft flesh now as Will had slid his fingers across smooth marble and Will covers Hannibal's hand with his own to keep it nestled there.

"She knows your mind, Hannibal. How could she…not suspect?"

"Suspicion is not enough to dissuade. In her defense, the elements to create the illusion have long been cultivated in my garden."

"God let the serpent in the garden. Did God make a mistake?" Will grins at receiving another taut tug of his hair.

"God was content to allow the serpent because the serpent amused him. You were the deal breaker as they say."

Hannibal releases the curls, lets them slip from his fingers as he surveys the room. "You see the design."

Will leans over the table, palms flat upon the cloth his head turning left and right gazing first at the seated mannequin and the door while Hannibal rolls another panel across the room.

“We have to adjust the angle of the table and move the rest of these panels. Bring more from the other room.” Will says.

“And mannequins, too, in anticipation of Uncle Jack.”

“Jack will be alerted when Pazzi’s wife makes a scene at the hospital. He’ll see your hand in that. He has no choice but to find Pazzi if he wants to find us. But Jack can’t send someone to tail Pazzi. Too many fingers in the pie already. Jack will want to keep this quiet until he has all three of us together. Pazzi may answer his phone, but he might come alone.”

“Agamemnon and Menelaus were brothers, their temperaments very different, not unlike our present brothers-in-arms and the Fates guide them here.”

Hannibal exudes a quiet confidence and Will studies his face carefully. He considers the relationships between Pazzi, Lounds, and Jack. Recent events begin to form a pattern in Will’s mind. The scope of Hannibal’s design is even broader than he and Daniel had uncovered. Hannibal has taken another page from Homer, his *Odyssey* this time, and made it his own. Lounds had unwittingly provided much more than a trap for Hera; she would provide the catalyst for setting the Greeks against each other.

“The goddess Athena turned the brothers on each other for not punishing the rape of Cassandra in her temple. She punished them all the way home.” Will says. “Agamemnon dies with Cassandra and Menelaus with Helen.”

“Athena is but an agent of Fate. The House of Atreus was already cursed by an act of hubris committed long before the brothers were born. An act with which I am intimately familiar but we can sink our teeth into that tale over a pleasant dinner, far from here.”

“Always sending me invitations.” Will says, somewhat baffled by the comment but intrigued by the apparent personal connection implicitly suggested in Hannibal’s phrasing. Hannibal’s circuitous logic has somehow appropriated Pazzi’s decision to sic Lounds on Daniel and write it into his *Iliad.*

“You are playing the agent of fate this time tying Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Cassandra together. Dominoes waiting to fall; you knew they wouldn’t trust each other with full disclosure of the messages you sent each of them.”

“I deduced. One cannot be surprised when the fig tree produces figs. Always ask of a thing what is it in itself; what is its nature. That is what you do, effortlessly, when you empathize. A gift that borders on the divine, Will.”

“Not effortlessly. A gift I have used in my pursuit of virtue.” Will picks at the tiny threads in the cloth as his ball of yarn unwinds in his head, “And the seeds of discontent sewn in that pursuit have sprouted and become the flames in my inferno.”

“A pursuit of virtue or a virtuous pursuit?” Hannibal drops the question with a raise of his brow. “Is it the pursuit of revenge you question or the pleasure you take in the pursuit? The seeds of discontent sewn in your inferno can be purged in the pursuit of the pleasure it is in your nature to embrace.”

"I have embraced the pleasure." Will insists.

His are eyes are glued to the walls transfixed by the vines creeping up from the floorboards twining along the molding and obscuring the frescoes covered in Vasari's *grotesques*. Tender green leaves pulse beside pale pink blossoms to shimmer from floor to ceiling. He grasps the thick fabric more tightly as Hannibal's voice fills the room unsure if it floats from the Hannibal beside him or the winged mass of feathers preening in the corner.

"Have you? Guilt is the ugly sister to shame and cousin to pity. Self-flagellation can become a pleasure in itself. Saints find it rather addictive."

The turn of Will's head is quick, implications absorbed like a slap. Hannibal ignores the furious flash of blue and concludes his admonishment.

"As you contemplate the act of virtue we intend to inflict upon Pazzi, contemplate also the nature of your pleasure and ask is it virtuous to deny that pleasure once taken."

Hannibal knows the anger his harsh words arouse. Will's anger had been ignited with stellar success earlier and Hannibal has merely prodded an encore performance for Pazzi. One can coddle a cub only so much. Purgatory is progress, but Paradise will be forever beyond Will's reach if he becomes too comfortable with the inured pain he endures. He watches the slender fingers curl around the cloth.

Doing bad things to bad people feels good. Are you a bad person, Will?

Will closes his eyes against the barrage of images Hannibal's words incite; plumose apparitions slink beneath his clothes and take to his flesh with talons and teeth, devouring him like a hoard of hungry ghosts. Will listens to Hannibal's footsteps scuff across the wood, hears him exit through the double doors into the smaller room.

Will recognizes the reprieve for what it is. His mind saturated with the images in his head and the ones he knows still climb along the walls and ceiling, Will has barely a moment to collect his ball of yarn when the room seems to shift and Will opens his eyes to see Hannibal emerge from the shadows of the open doorway.

"Back so soon?" Will asks lifting his head. "Here to bestow another tongue lashing?"

Hannibal touches his shoulder and Will invariably straightens with the conditioned prompt as the cap is removed from his head and set on the table. He looks questioningly at Hannibal as his glasses are gently pulled from his ears to join the cap. He opens his mouth to speak but the words are quieted by the thumb that alights upon his lips.

"Of a kind."

Hannibal drags his thumb across Will's opened lips easing inside his mouth so Will can bathe it with his tongue. Will draws the thumb deeper to slide between his teeth and sucks as Hannibal's fingers caress his face. He feels breath upon his cheeks, Hannibal's lips enticingly smooth as he repeats back to him the line Will had quoted by the statue and finishes the verse.

"*My assurance too, is there in your glance, affectionate, rueful, true. What power on earth would dare deny that death should spare a creation as rare and beautiful as you?*"

Will gazes into the dark eyes that hold him captive in their black depths.

"Do you understand, Will?"

Will shakes his head into the hands that cradle him.

"I see what you see, but you see your imago of me. Not *me*."

"Tsk. Tsk. And your sun kissed fantasy of me? Really, Will. You think I didn't know?"

"That…is different."

"You prefer how you see yourself? The creature you see is not me. He is a reflection of you. With what did you create him but the broken shards of the mirror you hold up to yourself."

Hannibal's lips brush alongside his mouth as he whispers and as the whiskers scrape the sore lips Will loses all restraint. He grabs Hannibal's hair by the handfuls, mouth open to accept the tongue that stabs between his teeth, long languorous strokes that send sparks along every nerve. He tugs at Hannibal's collar next as his own jumpsuit is ripped from his shoulders and his shirt yanked away. Hannibal murmurs in Italian as his teeth seek that most favorite of places to gnaw along his collarbone.

Will writhes in the strong arms that hold him fast as teeth sink into his flesh drawing frantic hisses and sending fresh currents of heated bliss. His mind swims against the current as he translates the verses Hannibal murmurs along his neck.

"*Seeing I'm yours, I rouse me from afar to come near the heaven I owe my being to…"*

Hannibal pauses to nibble and lick beneath his throat, the flesh there already raw and too tender to resist. Will folds into Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal bears the weight, groans softly sinking incisors into skin the flash of pain at his shoulder wonderfully sweet tingling to the bone.

Ocean roars through his mind and Will sees glimpses of blue skies and foam glistening on sand that sparkles like frost the sun is so bright. His hands find Hannibal's chest and fingers linger upon solid flesh that swells at his touch, nipples become hardened nubs and Will knows every pinch sends waves of pulsing pleasure straight to Hannibal's cock.

"*With your allure the bait, I'm drawn to you, tugged…"*

Hannibal's hands are all over him plucking at buttons and tugging at his belt. His uniform then shirt is quickly stripped off, shirt tossed to the floor and uniform left hanging from his waist. A moment later he stands naked, his trousers pooled at his feet and Will is guided backwards to the table. His fingers grasp its edge, elbows bent to steady him against the assault of open mouthed kisses that leave him dazed. He sucks contentedly on the fingers thrust into his mouth.

"… as with hook and line poor fishes are."

Other fingers, slick and warm slip between his legs to stroke the swollen sac, his cock throbs with the instantaneous rush of blood. Hannibal gently massages him allowing the glans to emerge and the exposed flesh tingles deliciously in the cool air. The fingers withdraw and Will hears Hannibal unzip his fly and the swish of fabric as he steps out of his trousers.

Hannibal is immediately on top of him, grinding him into the crisp cotton draped over the table powerful thighs easing his legs apart. The rigid cock slides over his naked flesh, and it feels like a rod of silk upon his skin gliding back and forth in teasing strokes against his cock and Will groans shamelessly. His hands strike helplessly at the bandages as he tries to grip a shoulder with one hand and hang on to the table with the other. Pleasure mounts and breathless, he winces in anticipation. The grinding halts suddenly and Hannibal's voice purrs huskily into his ear.

"Turn over. I know what you really want."

"Can I have it with poetry?"

"You are…delightfully infuriating."

Before Will can oblige and push himself completely off the table he is abruptly flipped over hips slamming into the beveled edge and all Will can do is grab onto the thick cloth and hold tight.

"*And, as a heart torn two ways fails to show much sign of life…*"

"That's…poetry?"

Will receives a crisp smack to the side of one butt cheek he knows left a mark. Hannibal clears his throat and continues.

"*To you both halves are given. Souls offered a choice, pick out the worthiest…"*

Lubricant, breathtakingly cold is hastily slathered along the crack of his ass and his muscles tense as a finger administers a healthy dollop around the twitching pucker of flesh and then penetrates slowly. The lonely finger is soon followed by another and Will moans into the tablecloth, fabric clenched tightly in his fists and feet anchored to the floor.

"…so not loving you is not life, that's how I'm driven."

The fingers tease and slide, stretching him wider and the two become three, at first slick and cool but quickly warmed and Will relaxes with the warmth and the rhythmic sliding. He rubs his cock against the polished wood, but a sharp slap to one cheek signals no cheating and his cock is banished to bounce below the table. Will wriggles against the fingers, jaws locked as they press against the prostate.

The fingers withdraw and Will tenses as the velvety tip nuzzles his primed flesh. Will squirms along the table shaking the damp hair from his face, beads of perspiration roll from his forehead and down his back as the tip pushes inside sinking deeper with every thrust. Will wants this, wanted it back at the grove. He needs to feel Hannibal inside him so badly. He needs to feel the flesh pounding into him slick, fevered, and alive like he remembers until he breaks upon the table completely shattered and spent.

"*I am wood. You are wood…"*

He feels Hannibal's breath upon his skin just above the small of his back, a prompt for him to finish Michelangelo's verse.

"*But gloriously…aflame."* Will hisses, in Italian, into the tablecloth.

Hannibal slides his fingers along Will's scalp, grabs a fistful of damp curls and pulls until Will rises off the table, head touching his back and his body stretched taut presumably so Hannibal can see every muscle attenuated, trembling from the assault that keeps pummeling him below. The pounding Will wants comes quick and rough and Will barely notices the aching of his wrists as they twist against the table or the hoarse wailing that escapes his throat. He is aware of nothing save the charged molecules detonating all around him and the blinding searing pleasure exploding inside as Hannibal splits him apart.

"Will..."

Will hears the snapping of fingers in front of his face and he wonders how this is possible while his cock twitches helplessly in Hannibal's fist. His own hands are still filled with fabric as he lies across the table, legs spread wide apart. Slowly he opens his eyes and is immediately unnerved. He feels flashes of scathing heat swiftly travel up his throat and his entire face burns hot.

Unbelievably, he leans over the table still fully clothed the drape wadded in his fists. But for the rigid and sweaty cock plastered to the inside of his trousers, Will has not moved. His mouth falls open; too stunned to say a word, to even utter a sound. Everything had felt so…real.

Hannibal stands beside him, also fully clothed and wearing the mask of mild curiosity Will finds alternately endearing and infuriating. He can't decide which at the moment. Neither can he decide if he's more upset that the he dreamed the entire encounter or disappointed that it didn't really happen. Aside from the acute embarrassment at Hannibal finding him mute and confused, alarm jangles sharply in his gut and his mouth feels like sawdust. He had not been able to tell he had been hallucinating. He shuts his mouth and attempts to swallow the dust.

"Contemplating the nature of your pleasure?"

Hannibal studies Will's chagrined expression and decides this recent episode signals a profound breakthrough. Will's subconscious is crashing into the conscious self that resists the loss of control but the more fluid the flow of his subconscious into his conscious the more easily Will will find his answers. Indulging his instincts with Pazzi should splinter his resistance completely. Patience.

Hannibal glances down at the white knuckled fists and Will uncurls his fingers releasing the damp wrinkled drop cloth. He inhales sharply and draws a trembling breath, and another struggling for composure as he meets Hannibal's eyes.

"What…did I do…or say?" The cracked voice still manages to charm.

"Was your retreat productive?" Hannibal asks earnestly.

Will flashes him a cold look for the evasiveness. Feeling self-conscious at Hannibal's continued and leisurely appraisal of him, Will crosses his arms as he considers the question.

"I believe you prompted a promising train of thought. How long did you stand there?"

"Not long."

"You did leave the room, didn't you?" Will asks trying to clarify the point at which his *retreat* began.

“Yes. And I returned with this panel.” Hannibal points vaguely behind him. “I was gone perhaps a minute when I noticed you hadn’t followed. I found you standing where I left you. Where did you go?”

“I never left the room.” Will says as the significance of this fact hits him.

I never left the room. Hannibal looked like Hannibal and I never left the room.

Encouraged, Will continues. “But you were in the room with me. And we um…talked.”

“Talked. About pleasure.”

“Yes.” Will stares at Hannibal, arms still stubbornly folded across his chest. “Talked about it.”

“You used to lie better, Will.” Hannibal chides though the lips quiver mischievously.

Just as Will is about press Hannibal, the words stop mid-tumble as Hannibal places a finger to his lips. Sufficiently shushed, Will follows the cold gaze to the far corner where both sets of double doors are. A shadow wobbles on the other side of the curtained panels that divide the room, weaving in the entranceway, uncertain and wary.

“*Eh! Che è in là*?” A male voice calls out, inquiring who goes there.

“Another custodian.” Hannibal whispers peeking around the curtain.

“A real one.” Will frowns. “What do you…?”

Will sighs, the rest of his question left unspoken as Hannibal bolts from behind the curtain wearing a friendly smile and bearing a shiny object in the hand he nonchalantly holds behind his back. Will grabs an embroidered cloth from the table without a second thought and steps out of their little enclave.

The immediate problem with the custodian becomes evident as Will crosses the room to catch up to Hannibal. He holds a walkie talkie like the one Hannibal appropriated from one of the offices and his finger is poised over the speaker switch. His utility belt hangs low about his hips, heavy with all kinds of implements with the potential to kill. Will doubts it would take much provocation for the man to defend himself. A fracas of that sort would become noisy very quickly.

The uniform he wears is identical to the ones he and Hannibal wear. Will assumes Hannibal had borrowed the uniforms right out of the staff closet but the wiry Italian is not fooled. His eyes narrow at Hannibal’s approach.

“*Ti conosco, eh? Dottore Boucher?”*

The astute Italian’s mouth curves smugly as he lifts the walkie talkie to his mouth, finger hovering over the speaker switch. A fatal misapprehension of the power differential, Hannibal thinks.

“Si.” Hannibal responds polite as always. “*Buonasera Signore.”*

The man’s brows furrow, caught off guard by the friendly tone. It is only when Hannibal raises his hand and the metal flashes that his reptile brain registers fear.

Hannibal moves with silent efficiency taking the man by his shoulder with one hand and administering a single lethal jab to the throat with the other. The entire assault takes mere seconds, but during those seconds Will is captivated by the elegance with which Hannibal executes his kill. Killing is uncomplicated for Hannibal, a simple savage pleasure for him and he is born to it. They both are and Will wonders fleetingly if this particular sentiment voiced by Hannibal many times is another of his loaded declarations.

Will catches the unfortunate man as he crumples to the floor his mouth strangled with a scream that never came, screwdriver lodged in the side of his neck. He tucks the tablecloth beneath head and floor and begins wrapping up head and screwdriver. The persistent pat of Hannibal's shoe beside the grotesquely twitching body draws his attention and he rolls his eyes up, annoyance erupting between his eyebrows as he wonders what infraction has caused the testy tapping.

"What? Do you need the screwdriver?"

Hannibal's eyes flicker with the expected sarcasm. "Plenty of screwdrivers, Will. Do you know what you just wrapped around the *Signor*'s head and upper torso?"

"A tablecloth?"

"No…it is a six hundred year old tapestry. The other side you neglected to notice displays the Medici family crest in silk needlepoint." Hannibal pulls a work rag from one of his pockets and commences wiping the blood from his hands with it.

Will sighs, shrugs, ties off the ends of the tapestry, tablecloth, whatever so that the head and bleeding wound are securely sealed within the thick fabric. At least the leakage from the wound will not spill onto the polished floor while they figure out where to stash the body.

"You might have mentioned that. Maybe next time you'll set the priceless antiques someplace else besides the dining room table."

Hannibal stares at the kneeling cub and the blood stained treasure he wraps around the corpse. Will's label of antique is deliberately dismissive and meant to provoke. Hannibal recalls a similar exchange at Mason's estate as they had prepared to leave in Will's Volvo when Hannibal had failed to mention Matteo. A scold from Will is very much like a kiss; laden with fire and affection. The little arrows pierce deeper still. Hannibal is enjoying this so much.

Will finally grimaces in what Hannibal supposes approximates as much of an apology as he is going to receive. The damage is done; nothing to be done about it now. Feeling much more congenial than he lets on, Hannibal also kneels down, slowly, feeling the swell of flesh beneath the bandages Daniel had applied and noting the tug of stitches does not register at all. He removes the tool belt, wrinkling his nose at the decidedly fecal whiff that emanates from the lower half. He grabs the walkie talkie, examines it, shuts it off, then slips it into a wide pocket while standing back up.

"Finished?" he asks Will.

Will slides back on his knees, looks up at Hannibal who towers over him, arms crossed, the man's utility belt hanging from one hand while fingers thoughtfully stroke at whiskers. Will chews on his lip and stares into the dark eyes until the ice melts and Hannibal shifts his gaze to the corpse and ruined tapestry.

“Where do we want to stuff him before he seeps all over the floor?” Will asks.

“There’s a cabinet in the corner painted like the panel.” Hannibal huffs, nods toward the back of the room. “The *Cinquecento* equivalent of a broom closet and a concealed passage that leads downstairs presumably where a kitchen once was. It should suffice.”

“Anyone else we should expect?”

“There’s a professor working late using the room of Leo X next door, at least intermittently. She comes and goes. There are other rooms beyond Leo’s room. Offices all around the third courtyard.”

Will knows the layout. Main hallways are few in the palazzo, rooms lead to other rooms, the palace a virtual maze, unnavigable to outsiders. All of the private rooms secreted in the palace have a main entrance from another room and a concealed escape route. Will imagines he and Hannibal will be utilizing at least one of those later tonight.

He holds the door to the camouflaged panel while Hannibal drags the corpse and the bloody tapestry across the floor. Judging by Hannibal’s cold countenance as he assesses the body once they stuff it into the passage, the matter of the ruined tapestry while forgiven is not forgotten.

Hannibal turns to Will, raises an imperious brow. Will allows him to get away with it. He lowers his eyes to stare at the floor in contrition. He waits knowing the visual appeal his mortal coil holds for Hannibal. He is also aware of the effect his acquiescent attitude will have on his beloved narcissist. Hannibal is aware he is being manipulated which of course only adds fuel to the fire between them.

“Pazzi will be armed with his gun.” Hannibal says, less sharply this time as his fingers drift to the thick curls at the nape of Will’s exposed neck. So infuriating… “We’ll have to disarm him quickly. I’ve already arranged the maze for him to follow.”

“I’m sure you have. He’s not going to part with his weapon easily. I have another idea about that.” Will counters.

“I’m listening.”

Will pokes Hannibal’s bandaged shoulder prompting an indignant scowl.

“I assume you have a point to make.” Hannibal says dryly.

“Did that hurt?”

Hannibal’s shoulder, thigh, and back are entirely numb. Will’s point is abundantly clear, his rational rooted in efficiency and in affection judging from the lustre reflected in the pale blue eyes that seem to drill into his.

“Not in the least. Your concern is that I risk further injury, a risk I was prepared to take. What are you thinking?”

“If I’m to play the bait again, I should lure him all the way to Lorenzo’s room. You can’t feel your injuries. That’s a hazard. You are the surgeon. Let me assume the risk.”

Hannibal has already gotten himself shot once. Will wonders why they are even having this discussion when the potential risk is so obvious. One look at the haughtily raised brow reminds him why.

“The risk is reduced if shared by two.”

Hannibal speaks as though the matter were closed and he turns from Will intending to return to the room of Cosimo the Elder for more panels. He turns back around incredulous as Will clears his throat preparing to actually countermand.

“If we were stuck on a boat…” Will begins, taking a step toward Hannibal and then another, adjusting his glasses he walks. “I’d let you take the risk and protect the mechanic. We’re not on a boat. He’s expecting a trap and if we want him to believe he caught us unprepared, let him think so for as long as possible.”

“I intended that he see his wife seated at the table when he wakes up… already on the table.” Hannibal protests though he can offer no valid counter to Will’s argument other than to press for purely personal preference.

“I know,” Will’s mouth puckers with the sadistic scenario he imagined Hannibal had cooked up. “She’ll provide a perfect distraction once I get him to the door. We’ll improvise.”

Hannibal considers Will’s suggestion. He thinks perhaps Will’s retreat earlier has left him a tad bit agitated and the physical activity required to snare Pazzi should alleviate that agitation considerably. As for the theater, Hannibal is content to delegate and otherwise defer. Practice makes perfect.

The walkie talkie on the table hums and whistles. Hannibal strides across the room leaving Will to close up the panel. Will watches as Hannibal listens to the conversation amidst the static.

“No time for rehearsals. He’s here.” Hannibal says.

Will listens to Pazzi’s outburst of epithets from his perch on the steps. Will has guessed Pazzi will take the stairs from this side. If not, he’ll have to dash back up and run across the *Sala dei Cinquecento* and down the other stairs. He had to choose a vantage point with decent visibility from which to monitor Pazzi and Will is vindicated for his selection. Pazzi starts toward the stairs where Will crouches above and Will slowly stands erect, takes a deep breath and begins his descent.

Will takes his time aware Pazzi’s mind is in turmoil and may require a few extra seconds for processing despite his training. Ordinarily, Pazzi is probably very good at his profession, but these are not ordinary circumstances.

After helping Hannibal arrange the heavy furniture, Will had left the *Quartieri Monumentali* and the remaining arrangements to Hannibal to go play the lure. He carries the second walkie talkie in a pocket and has left it on so that Hannibal can be cued occasionally at the press of a button, on a different channel, of course.

He pulls his cap down low as he descends the staircase sensing Pazzi’s distress with every harried step he takes. His Berretta is already in his hand and Will can’t tell if the safety is off or not. He decides it doesn’t matter. The probability that Pazzi will alert security before finding his wife is minimal. Will thinks Pazzi enjoys using it as a club anyway. He isn't carrying himself. His Berretta is upstairs. No bullets for Pazzi.

Will shifts to the railing, head down, clearly avoidant and giving the cop in Pazzi reason to take more than a cursory look at him. Predictably, Pazzi moves to center. Will waits until the last possible second to look up and he makes the brief eye contact count. Pazzi raises the Berretta and Will shoves him to the opposite side of the stairs. Pazzi whirls, teeters on the step and Will lunges forward, friction from the railing burning his hands as he takes two steps at a time.

Will makes a show of bumbling up the other staircase. He fishes in his pocket for the walkie talkie, switches it on and mumbles his location. Pazzi's arrival at the bottom of the stairs forces him to let his finger off the switch. He allows the huffing and puffing Pazzi to tackle him. His back and butt take the brunt of the fall but the discomfort is manageable and as he looks up into the flushed and bloated visage, he is confident Pazzi believes he is more pain than he actually is.

Pazzi rips the glasses from his face and tosses them aside. Will smiles contemptuously at the gun barrel Pazzi moves from his temple to aim at his nose.

"Where is she?" Pazzi huffs chest heaving.

"Who?" Will asks wide-eyed.

He receives a clip to the side of his head for that, though he doesn't feel it much. He knows the Lidocaine has numbed the nerves there, but he winces and plays it up for Pazzi as though his head is throbbing.

"My wife. Where is she? What have you done with her?"

Pazzi is full of bravado but desperation drips with every word.

"I have never seen your wife." Will says with marked conviction. He hasn't.

"Enough games. Take me to her."

"I already told you…"

Will's words are cut off by the Berretta grinding into his throat and he struggles for breath a moment while Pazzi figures out what to do next. Will thinks if it were his wife being held hostage upstairs the man in his way would be in a world of hurt by now.

Impatient, he knocks the Berretta from Pazzi's hand and takes for the stairs again, losing the cap along the way and Pazzi scrambling right behind him. The chase is invigorating and Will has to force himself to slow down as he approaches the top, allowing the wheezing Pazzi to catch up. He is grabbed from behind by the collar and he lets Pazzi drag him into the great hall amazed Pazzi is not suspicious of being played.

They grapple for a while and Will takes the beating Pazzi gives him, each and every punch sauce for the goose. Will manages to stumble away and click the walkie talkie for a moment before Pazzi is at him again. Finally, Pazzi lands a blow to his jaw, Berretta in hand and this does hurt. A lot. Will drops to the floor and Pazzi wastes no time jerking his head up by the hair and digging the barrel into the side of head where the stitches are.

His jaw thrums with a dull pain that could be a lot worse were it not for the Lidocaine and his mouth twitches with the memory of Pazzi's boot at the slaughter house. Will thinks his appearance has suffered enough at Pazzi's hands. Looking like a prize fighter will draw more attention than he needs. He looks up at Pazzi and turns on the waterworks.

The satisfaction that beams from Pazzi's face only serves to arouse the predator inside and Will throws himself into the performance.

"Take me to your boyfriend, then." The meat says.

"No." Will says on the verge of crocodile tears.

"You think I won't shoot you here in the palazzo?"

"I think…you won't risk upsetting Hannibal." Will says with a note of petulance Pazzi can't possibly miss.

"I know what you are trying to do." Pazzi says.

"Do you? Too much knowing is misery, didn't you know?" Will says, quoting from a poem by Lorenzo de Medici and doubting Pazzi has a clue.

"What are you talking about? Get up." Pazzi's face crumples in annoyance.

"Give me a good reason and I'll think about it."

Will shudders with another assault to his scalp as Pazzi tightens his grip on the fistful of hair and shakes him nearly senseless.

"I want my wife, Mr. Graham. I intend to trade you for her. Lecter rescued you from Verger, orchestrated the entire thing. All for you."

"And how does that help you?" Will hisses through clenched teeth.

"I love my wife. He loves you."

"Not more than he loves himself."

"Let's found out, eh? Which…dining room is he in?"

Will rolls his eyes toward the narrow hallway leading to the *Quartieri Monumentali.* He allows Pazzi to drag him by the hair across the polished floor on his knees for a few feet, but pain and impatience cause Will to end this part of his performance.

"All right. All right." Will begs, "Let me up. I'll walk you there. But it's not what you think."

"And you think you know what I think? You're fucked up, Graham. You and Lecter should have left my wife alone, run while you had the chance. Which one of you did I shoot, anyway?"

"Hannibal. But you were aiming for me, weren't you? Shouldn't have done that. You should have killed him instead of…making him mad."

"A mistake I intend to fix."

Pazzi lets him up, gives him a second or two to compose himself before grabbing him by the arm and jerking him roughly to his side. The barrel of the gun grinds into bone despite the layers of clothing and Will decides that experience has taught Pazzi no one listens to him unless he wears a badge or a gun.

"Oh no. You walk beside me." Pazzi says as though Will should be warming to the idea any second now, "We'll enter the dining room together. Which one of the apartments?"

"*Lorenzo il Magnifico*, of course." Will grins thinking the location should have been perfectly obvious given Hannibal's invitation.

They walk side by side down the corridor, through the Room of Cosimo the Elder, which has been emptied of all the panels of curtains and mannequins Pazzi's gun pressing into his ribs the entire walk. Will halts before the double doors prompting an exasperated sigh from Pazzi.

The walls and doors are thick, built to prevent eavesdropping by design and Hannibal's selected mood music does not permeate. Pazzi hesitates but not for long.

"Open the doors. All the way." Pazzi's accent is thick, further evidence of how rattled he is.

Will is pleased to oblige. He opens the doors wide, Pazzi's gun still pressed to his side so Pazzi can peer inside the darkened room. Will admires the stage Hannibal has set from the threshold. The eye cannot help but follow the converging lines of the panels arranged so that a path leads directly to the only source of light in the room.

One lamp has been left on and it is draped with a table cloth angled to the floor and placed in the corner behind the chair where the erstwhile *Signora Pazzi* sits stiffly in shadow before the halo of light, hands on the table and head obscured in darkness. Pazzi fixates on the seated figure and his Berretta falters.

Will looks to Hannibal by the window and, receiving a nod grabs the paralyzed Pazzi by the wrist forcing him to drop his weapon. Will sends it spinning into darkness. The awful yelp Pazzi emits is as much pain as it is surprise as he sinks to his knees. Out of the corner of his eyes Will sees Hannibal edging closer for a better look.

Hannibal stays within the confines of the shadows careful not alert Pazzi to his presence as he watches Will with approval. Not that Pazzi had a chance once Will opened the doors and Pazzi seems rather preoccupied at the moment. Now that Will has relieved him of his only advantage the fun will truly begin. Will moves on Pazzi with animal assuredness, entirely in the moment as Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 5, Second Movement* provides the requisite ambiance. Hannibal thinks the choice of substituting a harp for the piano is a rather nice touch.

Will wastes no time hurling the disarmed and cowed Pazzi across the floor. He crumbles in a heap and Will easily wrestles him onto his back. His attempts to dislodge Will are largely futile. Calves wrapped around Pazzi's hips like a vice, Will grasps Pazzi's head between his hands and slams it to the floor. The rush of power feels so incredibly good Will bangs Pazzi's skull against the wood again. And again. One more time…

Doing bad things to bad people feels incredibly good, doesn't it, Will?

Good…doesn't even come close…

“I told you…it’s not what you think.” Will leans in so he can sniff the fear from Pazzi’s breath, it sours his sweat like cologne left too long in the bottle. “Now…get up.”

“Where…what did you do with my wife?” Pazzi eyes struggle to focus.

Will slams Pazzi’s skull again. Breathless with anticipation and pumped with adrenaline, Will lets go and grips the lapels of his jacket pulling him part way off the floor as Pazzi’s eyes roll up in his head. Will wonders if Pazzi can even stand up straight by himself. He turns around briefly to check Hannibal’s position.

The double doors are closed once again and Hannibal stands waiting with hands at his sides. He lifts his chin once signaling he’s ready any time Will decides he’s inflicted enough head bashing. Will turns back to Pazzi but not before noticing the gleam of gratification mirrored in Hannibal’s eyes.

“And I told you…I have never seen your wife. Get…Up.”

Will allows Pazzi to struggle to his feet. As he stares into the dazed and battered face Will thinks of the cruel smile that had blossomed each time Pazzi had struck him with the butt of his Berretta. He looks to Hannibal and holds up one finger. Hannibal nods from the shadows and moves to take up position behind Pazzi.

Will savors the crunch of cartilage when his fist lands square in Pazzi’s face. Pazzi stumbles backward but Will provides a corrective shove so Pazzi falls directly in Hannibal’s path. He stares at the blood smeared on his knuckles as Pazzi squirms in agony caught in Hannibal’s arms.

Will looks into Hannibal’s eyes and heat crackles between them as their eyes meet. Vibrations of chaos fill the air and feeling the tug of contentment he favors Hannibal with a quick and naughty flick of his tongue.

Hannibal nods graciously as he wraps an arm around Pazzi’s throat lifting him off the ground. He adds to the discomfort by twisting Pazzi’s arm to the breaking point and holds it there. Will took quite a beating from Pazzi this time and Hannibal had enjoyed watching Will indulge his instincts and with much more theater than Hannibal had expected. He watches Will search the floor for Pazzi’s gun. Will appears a bit fatigued from his fight but mostly exhilarated. Satisfied that Will has not drifted off, he tightens his grip on Pazzi’s throat.

Pazzi is attempting to make sense of his situation and is right now anxiously hoping that Jack Crawford will somehow burst in with a slew of FBI agents. Pazzi has likely not realized that his wife is not on the premises. Whether or not he recognized the mannequin for what it is, is immaterial. Pazzi will not allow himself to believe he was duped.

“*Capitano Pazzi.* I’ve been expecting you.”

Hannibal speaks into Pazzi’s ear and does not miss the distinctive flexing of gluteal muscle as Pazzi attempts to control his bladder. It would appear that Pazzi is a lot of bluster. No bite left in him at all.

“I can’t believe he fell for it again.” Will says from behind him. “You were right.”

Will walks around front; he tucks Pazzi’s Berretta in his back pocket and raises his brows at Hannibal. His fingers pulse with pain and he kneads the sore tendons wishing for some ice. He feels sore all over and his body throbs with the awareness. He can feel his blood moving through his veins and his skin crawls with excitement. He feels…alive.

“Fate knocked on Rinaldo’s door centuries ago. May I call you Rinaldo? We have become rather intimate wouldn’t you agree?”

Hannibal takes the grunt as affirmation.

“Rinaldo. Did you really believe that Will, who killed two knife wielding Paolini by himself, men larger and younger than he, would be so easily and quickly subdued by you?”

It’s barely a rhetorical question given Pazzi’s predicament, more a rebuke. Pazzi looks at Will from slits, Hannibal’s arm coiled around his neck like a python and as Will studies the puffy face bulging over the top of Hannibal’s bicep he thinks if he could ask Pazzi anything and actually receive an honest answer, he would like to know if the shield Pazzi wears ever meant anything to him.

Hannibal notices the vacant expression and hefts Pazzi with him as he turns to the side to see better see Will. He’s about to ask whether Will contemplates virtue or pleasure as he stares at Pazzi , but Will shakes off his reverie and focuses on Hannibal once again.

“Can you um…knock him out with a hold like that?” Will says knowing full well what Hannibal is capable of.

Hannibal flexes his muscles, testing his hold for show. He thinks Pazzi’s bent arm should be one constant stream of pain by now.

“Hmmm. That would require a lighter touch than the hold I used on Mason to snap his neck.”

“Yes. But not quite as…lethal as the hold on Ruggerio.”

“How long do you think?” Hannibal asks feeling Pazzi’s breath quicken with Will’s ridiculous assertion. Once asphyxiated, consciousness depends on the individual. Pazzi now believes Hannibal capable of…divine intervention. Hannibal almost smiles.

Will holds out one whiskey finger for the sole purpose of gliding it suggestively over his lips.

“Ah, yes. I think I can manage that.”

“I’ll um, clear the table.”

Hannibal applies the requisite pressure and Pazzi slips into unconsciousness. He releases Pazzi after a moment and lets him drop to the floor. As Will saunters over to join him, his nostril twitch with the whiff of ammonia that that emanates from Pazzi. With the relaxation of muscles comes the release of the bladder.

“He won’t be out long.” Hannibal says grasping Pazzi by the ankles.

“How long do you think?” Will asks noting the dark stain that has seeped through Pazzi’s trousers.

“Minutes. Though the occasions for calibrated asphyxiation have been few, it has been my experience that the body regains consciousness quickly. We’ll have time to get him to the table.”

Will attends to Pazzi's upper half, hoisting him up from behind under the arms while Hannibal hefts the unwieldy legs. Pazzi's head rolls, eyes closed and jaw slack as though fast asleep. They lift Pazzi onto the table gently as possible. A dead body or one at rest is much more difficult to manage than a conscious one. Pazzi's inert body practically spills over the table.

Hannibal immediately begins to rifle through his medical bag. Will's shadow falls across the table and the air crackles with his scent. Hannibal looks up at the slightly creased brow.

"The human body can absorb only so much trauma. Pazzi may require drugs if he is to remain breathing while we carve him up. And…" Hannibal pauses as he locates the syringe he wants. "We will need time to rearrange the room. For Jack."

"Daniel filled your grocery list. What are you thinking of giving him?"

Hannibal nods toward Pazzi and holds up the syringe already filled with a solution. "He's not in the best of health. Hard to predict how his heart will react without some degree of dissociation. Lidocaine won't do the trick. Ketamine will knock him out for a few minutes. The assorted opiates will send him into a trance."

"So what did you prepare?"

"A small dose of what I gave you at Boboli to keep him out a little longer." Hannibal rolls the syringe between his fingers, the poignant parting in the garden impossible to forget. "I added select opiates to enhance the experience. Easy on the respiratory system and he will experience sensation. You did."

Memory stirs and Will remembers the damp earth and dew soaked grass at his back, snippets of conversation and verse roll through his mind as the sting of a syringe sinks into his shoulder.

"Is that what you did? Kept giving me little doses once Du Maurier's special blend wore off?" Will manages through the fog, thinking he should have had a peek at his own forensic report.

"Scant drops of Ketamine. I had to prolong your unconscious state. For appearances."

Hannibal chuckles at the narrowed eyes and drawn mouth. Will's memory will forever be clouded by the drugs. Floating between hallucinations, Will had been at his most vulnerable, uninhibited and completely guileless. Hannibal's chest had ached with the beauty of the tableau he had created that morning. And the honesty that had streamed down Will's cheek. Fate that it had been in the Boboli Gardens where the initial rose of trust between them had sprouted from the dirt where God had laid his Adam.

Every moment Will had languished in his chains had been but a reflection of the daily anguish Hannibal had experienced since arriving in Florence without him. Will had seen himself as Adam beneath the tree of knowledge that morning as he was meant to in the company of Jack and his entourage. The true test of his imagination is if Will can look beyond himself and see Hannibal in those chains.

"I remember you touching my face." Will says suddenly, softly. "You stole a tear."

Hannibal sighs as he passes his nose through the tangle of curls, unaccustomed to this stark candor between them. Hesitation hovers, duel circuits seem to discharge in his brain, the ingrained impulse to guard his thoughts from Will conflicts with the equally strong impulse to take Will's upturned face in his hands and swallow him whole.

Wrathful Achilles looks down at his impetuous Patroclus, takes in the wounded lips and the impassioned welt beneath the whiskers along his jaw that will become an angry bruise. Will has not been twisting in his inferno alone. Like Tityus bound to the rocks of Hades, Hannibal has been twisting in an inferno too; its flames unable to cauterize his heart had instead eviscerated it, over and over again only to have Desire return to consume him each time. Hannibal cannot be free of the flames until Will is.

"Water…for the garden." Hannibal returns simply as the pale blue eyes tic and Will blinks away the mist that threatens to descend.

Will nods and looks aside, Hannibal's words too much like sutures bursting from a wound still tender. He is startled nearly out of his loafers as Hannibal sets the syringe onto the table and turns to grab him by the neck and plants a deep open-mouthed kiss. Sparks sizzle behind his eyes as his sore lips crash into Hannibal's teeth. Stunned by the ardor with which Hannibal devours his mouth, it takes a couple seconds for Will to relax into the embrace. His hands grope up sleeves to grasp biceps and he pulls Hannibal to his chest not certain he isn't hallucinating. Again.

Will lets go of the muscular arms signaling he's had enough, but Hannibal is undaunted by Will's paltry protest, he wields his tongue like a sword relentlessly seeking the back of Will's throat. A drink to quench the fire Will inspires. The melody they share flows like notes plucked from the harp of Beethoven's concerto, like ink to the page.

A predator's instincts never sleep and Hannibal pauses from his delights as the kiss and the concerto are interrupted by the awareness of movement from the table. He turns his head slightly to catch a glimpse of the semi-conscious Pazzi. Will moves with him lips still plastered to his mouth.

"Inevitable." Will mumbles into flesh the taste of blood savagely sweet on his tongue as Hannibal's mouth plays over his wet whiskers.

Hannibal swipes crimson from lips that peel back in a pearly smile. "Consistently inconvenient."

"He's a fugitive from death." Will says.

Hannibal reaches for the syringe, sinks it into the slack muscle of Pazzi's shoulder. "Let him travel the path no one has ever left alive."

Their eyes lock in synchronous accord, the notes struck between them sonorous and sweet; no chords of dissonance to mar the perfection of this moment he shares with Will. Hannibal licks his lips again and tastes Paradise.

Jack glances at the dashboard, reads the glowing green LED lights for the umpteenth time and groans in exasperation. He had forgotten how difficult it could be to find parking in the tourist sections of Florence and the *Piazza della Signoria* certainly qualifies as touristy.

Impulsively, he turns into the lot of the Hotel Bernini Palace, one of the finest hotels in Florence as its name suggests and guides the SUV into a reserved space. He checks his sidearm, his pockets, a quick inventory, and tosses the FBI hangtag on the dashboard before climbing out.

The Bernini Palace is situated a couple blocks from *Piazza della Signoria* and Jack bolts past people, twisting his shoulders to avoid colliding with the obstacles in his way. His inner monologue careens between the recent conversations he just finished on his very warm phone.

Agent Cummings has placed Pazzi's wife under the care of an amenable resident psychiatrist at the hospital in Siena. *Signora Pazzi* is receiving counseling and mild sedatives while she waits for word on her husband. Jack did not mention that the word on her husband will likely keep her at the hospital for a while.

Inspector Santo was not pleased with Jack's report on the fire at Villa Fiore, but he had seemed to appreciate the head's up and authorized all-points bulletins on Du Maurier and Freddie Lounds. With a little luck, Du Maurier's ruse will backfire. He has Hannibal to thank for that and the thought that he has been saddled with a gift from the devil throbs with all the subtlety of a drill in the back of his head.

As he turns the corner, the *Palazzo Vecchio* comes into full view; its distinctive façade looms over the piazza, the lights from the tower, the *Loggia*, and the Uffizi casting a hazy glow in the humid night. He remembers his last visit here with Bella, decades ago, and as he makes his way toward the palazzo he cannot shake the impression that he heads toward a destiny dished up in the tableaux dripping with Dante and bloodied valentines. Every step fills Jack with the certainty that he has been led down an inescapable path and he is about to walk through Rodin's *Gates of Hell*.

He pauses before the great doors of the Medici fortress at the replicas of Michelangelo's *David* and Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus*, the *David* a veiled protest of Medici power and the other, symbolic of the Medici's enduring capacity to retain that power. He wonders if Will has it within himself to defy his Goliath or if, like Cacus, he has already succumbed to Hannibal's Herculean hold on him. Jack draws a resigned breath as he approaches the gates of hell.

* * *

"Uncle Jack is here." Hannibal looks to Pazzi as does Will.

"When it rains it pours." Will says. "Menelaus and Agamemnon have been conspiring."

"Interesting." Hannibal says. "We don't have much time. Jack will find the appetizer but it will have no context for him."

"Depends on what Pazzi told him."

"I wonder what else Uncle Jack knows." Hannibal says.

"Or thinks he knows." Will says.

"He came alone. What does that tell you?"

"That Jack…intended to sacrifice Pazzi. And…that Pazzi intended to sacrifice Jack." Will pauses, "What does it tell you?"

"That we have another guest for dinner." Hannibal says as he selects a scalpel for Will. "Have you decided on its presentation?"

“The heavens have set my appetites in motion and I have tasted both bitter and sweet in the garden.”

Will sets down the scalpel he had picked up in favor of the one Hannibal holds out. He lets his fingers linger as he takes the implement of both destruction and creation from Hannibal’s hand, a silent acknowledgement of the cup that passes between them.

“But the heavens alone are not the source of all things good and evil.” Will turns to Hannibal with a long inviting sigh.

Hannibal accepts Will’s invitation and finishes the sentiment culled from the pages they know so well.

“Because if that were truly so, there would be no free will, no justice in giving bliss for virtue, pain for evil.”

“No pleasure in one’s pursuits.” Will says resolute and looking into the face that mirrors the conviction behind his words, “Neither heaven nor hell has brought us to this moment. Fate has set the table. I don’t think the Medici would mind if I borrow a page from Dante for the presentation.”

Hannibal nods graciously.

“Do you remember the eighth circle of hell?” Will says.

He glances at the allegories of Fame and Virtue flanking the mural of Lorenzo and imagines their dark counterparts attending Pazzi’s flayed corpse like skeletal apparitions; allegories of ignominy and vice.

“The fraudulent and malicious souls are sent there.” Hannibal says with growing curiosity, “Malebolge is made of nine bolgias, each with a specific punishment for a specific sin.”

Hannibal considers the assorted punishments Dante visits in his evil ditches as Pazzi’s eyelids flutter.

“You see our doomed *Capitano* as a sower of discord.” Hannibal says. “Of the schismatic variety.”

Hannibal smiles with approval. Of course. Dante had imagined his God affronted by religious discord and like God, Will has taken similar offense to Pazzi’s malicious interference. Will’s sense of decency is his religion and he has had enough of the repeated refrain of dissonance in his garden. What better allegory of Fate than to rip the sower open and expose the spiteful seeds for what they were destined to become. Will’s conception of *contrapasso* exceeds expectations.

However, Hannibal thinks the *Polizia* Captain’s disgrace will not be complete without the proof of the prize for which he sold his soul. He stoops down and Will lifts his head to find Hannibal retrieving Pazzi’s jacket from under the table.

“You think he brought Mason’s envelope with him?”

“I doubt he left home without it.” Hannibal says.

“It would make a nice addition to the tableau.” Will agrees.

The envelope is as rumpled as the jacket but intact. Hannibal opens it while Will waits, scalpel poised in the air. He quickly peruses the documents leaving the key in the envelope. His eyes crease with amusement as he reads.

Hannibal extends the paperwork to Will, the shine of grudging admiration in his eyes.

“Mason actually subtracted expenses.” Will says squinting at the statement.

“Papa would have been proud.”

“An empire built on generational maladjustment.”

“Not this generation.” Hannibal says on a bright note.

Will raises a cautionary brow and turns his attentions back to Pazzi who should be feeling a slight chill judging by the goosebumps that ripple along his flesh. Not to mention the duct tape over his mouth just in case his vocal chords and throat were not sufficiently bruised. Hannibal tucks the envelope in a pocket and commences looping the coarsely braided rope around Pazzi’s wrists. Once he has tied off that knot he repeats the process around each of Pazzi’s ankles. Nodding to Will that their prey is secure, he returns to Will’s side to watch Pazzi emerge from his daze.

“Start below the collarbone along the breastplate, here.” Hannibal instructs fingers pressing into Pazzi’s chest. “You can cut as low as you like, but we’ll leave the windpipe intact. He’ll be lucid enough for conversation.”

Will hesitates and Hannibal wonders at the reason, considering perhaps that cutting into Pazzi’s warm flesh with a scalpel is not like slicing into Tier’s cooled corpse. The transition from cadaver to actual patient is the much same. The sense of power and of responsibility can be overwhelming and often the point at which medical students become surgeons or general practitioners. Will has to be careful of nicking vital organs if he desires to complete his imagined tableau. It is something about Will’s expression that alerts Hannibal to the source of Will’s inertia. He’s gloating.

The scowl of contempt relaxes and Will allows himself an exultant smile as he gazes at Pazzi’s nude form stretched out on the table. Pazzi’s defective tool of perception is decidedly deficient. His mind wanders to Pazzi’s bedroom and he imagines Pazzi’s tobacco stained fingers fumbling with a lamp on the nightstand to turn out the lights before slipping in beside his wife. He responds to Hannibal’s inquisitive stare with his usual avoidance.

Hannibal allows Will a couple of seconds to scrutinize the stains in the drop cloth.

“Pazzi took some cheap shots at your masculinity? Always the lament of the less endowed.”

“All put to rest thanks to Boboli.” Will rolls a reproachful eye at Hannibal.

“Likely the icing on the cake. The vagina can accommodate five to six inches of penis before the cervix blocks further egress. Simple math would indicate…”

Will waves his hand and blinks away the imagery though Hannibal’s tendency to sound like a textbook wrings a fractured smile. The simple math causes Will to conclude that Pazzi has never tapped his wife’s or anyone else’s cervix. Will thinks he will split Pazzi open clear to the shriveled joke hiding in the hair between the spindly legs.

Pazzi frowns with the buzzing of what must be huge bees around the pool. He thinks the music pleasant enough as the water he floats in grows cold.

“About the music.” Will says pointing the scalpel at the player on the floor.

“Chopin too sedate?”

“Something more cheerful. What else have you got?”

“An entire library of iTunes.”

“When did you get iTunes?”

“Really, Will. I do look up from a book from time to time…”

The rolling notes of the piano stop abruptly and the indeterminate buzzing Pazzi has heard around him becomes definitive, words crystalize in his mind and the buzzing begins to make sense as he strings sentences together. He had been drifting on the melody as though floating on water the occasional fish tugging at his limbs but he hears more than music now. His environment seems to move around him. He continues to float however as he listens to the voices by the pool… He wonders who put fish in the pool. Someone is humming a tune, but he doesn’t know this song.

“It goes like that.” Will insists, certain Hannibal knows the composition. He’s not that off-key.

“One more time.” Hannibal says.

He stubbornly holds his phone away from Will, enjoying every second of the frustration it causes as Will’s mouth twists with the effort to avoid letting his favorite expletives spill out.

Will waves the scalpel chidingly at Hannibal but hums the piano part he hears in his head again as Hannibal’s thumb moves over the screen of his phone. Will finds this especially endearing for reasons he can’t quite articulate.

“It’s um…adante…or an allegro…I think. Don’t remember which movement. I know you know it.”

“Hmmm. Perhaps Schubert.” Hannibal says sounding dubious just for the eye roll.

He is fairly certain he knows the piece Will had hummed, and he had hummed well. Will is more musically inclined than he thinks himself capable. Hannibal would like to hear him hum more often. A piano will definitely be among their first purchases Hannibal decides. As for the moment, Hannibal is enjoying himself immensely and more importantly, so is Will.

“You didn’t seem to approve of Shubert downstairs.” Hannibal says, noticing the tics that afflict Pazzi’s features as they converse.

“A different piece was playing downstairs. The one I’m thinking of is happy.” Inspiration descends and Will taps the scalpel in the air, pleased with himself. “It’s a quintet. Trout.”

“It’s the fourth movement you want. An *allegretto*.” Hannibal enunciates each syllable for Pazzi drawing him from the haze of dissociation into the present.

The fog in Pazzi’s head swirls. He is on a calliope with violins and a piano that seems to trip up and down the keyboard. The voices continue and he tunes in, paying closer attention.

“*Allegretto* denotes a brisk joyful melody…”

“*Allegretto* is faster than *allegro*?” Will says, catching on.

Will turns back to the body stretched out on the table. Pazzi’s face is smeared with blood from the swollen nose and he winces in concentration. Will slides his finger from throat to clavicle, lightly following the contour of the collarbone to the tip of the sternum. He lets his finger rest there feeling the pulsing of blood beneath and watching the rib cage rise as Pazzi takes breath. Pazzi’s eyes slide around like caramel colored liquid between fluttering slits as he attempts to focus on him. Will knows he appears to Pazzi as a bleary image shifting in a distant cloud. He leans over Pazzi and adjusts his grip on the scalpel.

“We’ll have to revisit your music lessons. Or your Italian. The tempo of *allegro* is quicker.”

“Potato…Po-Tah-to…”

Allegretto…allegro…Allegra… Allegra. Allegra. Where the fuck am I?

The scalpel is sharp, its edge so shiny that a trail of light gleams in its wake as it slices through the air. Will hits bone immediately and he halts, feels Hannibal’s breath on his neck and he adjusts the angle again.

Pazzi’s eyes blink open with a most indescribable sensation. Like the sting of ice but searing hot at the same time. He hears moaning and realizes the cries come from his own lips. Oddly, his lips seem stuck together. He floats with the violins as the burning ice melts down his torso.

Skin and tissue part effortlessly as Will guides the scalpel down the sternum keeping his hand steady. He stops when he reaches the bottom of the sternum remembering the liver and stomach are cradled in the lower ribs. The sense of awe is profound as flesh peels away revealing the slick organs quivering inside. He takes the scalpel down slowly, his left hand riding shotgun to steady him. His thoughts invariably shift to Randall Tier. Tier’s body had been so very cool and still. This one is so very warm. Everything seems to vibrate.

We always remember our first, don’t we Will?

Hello, Randall.

You gave me what I wanted in life.

You gave me what I wanted in death. Even Steven.

This feels different, doesn’t it?

Yes, it does.

It will never feel the same.

I know.

Remember that. Remember what you felt with me.

So I remember who I am.

Pazzi watches the dark figures pulsate on the ceiling. His eyes roll to the side with shifting of light.

Who is that? What is this place? I have to find Allegra…

Randall's battered body hovers on the other side of the table while Will works. He doesn't mind. Will had taken care with Tier's dismemberment. His regret had guided the scalpel and there had seemed an aura of reverence around the table as Hannibal had stood beside him. Will hears echoes of Bach in his head; all six *Brandenburg Concertos* had played through that night and Will cannot listen to any of them without images of Tier splayed on metal intruding. As he cuts into Pazzi he feels no reverence. There is only fascination as muscle and fatty tissue rupture beneath the blade.

This *is* different. Compassion has departed and he feels only contempt. Does God feel contempt?

Hannibal notices the beads of perspiration glistening beneath the fringe of curls as Will concentrates. His hand is steady, his touch appropriately delicate, but Will is a novice. It will take time for him to be completely comfortable with a scalpel and Hannibal does not rush him. Killing Pazzi is an act of premeditated murder and this fact must also be acknowledged, processed and filtered.

He checks the ropes binding Pazzi to the table instead. Pazzi's own movements are more likely to cause a slip of the scalpel than Will. Pazzi is regaining consciousness quickly. Hannibal's questions are few and Pazzi has but minutes of life remaining.

The blurry silhouette leaning over him begins to brighten and its eyes, nose, and mouth coalesce. There is a distinctive odor in the air, but he can't place it. Something smells bad. He feels woozy as the mouth moves and he focuses on the words blowing through the thin lips.

I know you…and I don't like you.

Pazzi's mind recoils. He wants the pool even if the fish keep tugging at his stomach.

"Rinaldo…"

He knows that voice. The fog lifts and Pazzi cringes inside as Lecter's face comes into sharp focus over his head. He swallows but it takes effort and he feels a dull pain everywhere, remote but persistent.

"Rinaldo…blink twice if you understand me."

Pazzi blinks.

"Good. Do you know where you are?"

Pazzi blinks, feels wetness clinging to his lashes this time. He's in *Palazzo Vecchio*. With the psychopaths.

Mio Dio…What is Graham doing? Where is Allegra?

"You aren't going to scream are you, Rinaldo? Good. I'm going to remove the duct tape so you can breathe better. Blink twice again if you understand."

Pazzi blinks again and Hannibal rips the duct tape from his mouth. Pazzi barely moves though he does grimace. Hannibal glances at Will to check his progress. Pazzi's navel splits in half in the wake of the scalpel Will moves over pallid flesh. The drop cloths are not absorbing the blood as well as hoped. Blood drips onto the tarps lining the floor. It won't be long before there are pools of it.

Pazzi realizes his arms are stretched over his head but they won't move. His legs must be there because he can see his toes on the one side of the table he appears to be tied to. His face throbs with a dull ache and he remembers Graham smashed his fist into it. He smells blood and the metallic taste of it causes the saliva gathered on his tongue to turn rancid. The smell of ammonia is also strong and he realizes the dampness he feels between his legs must be piss.

Please let it be piss…

"Careful with the abdomen." Hannibal warns.

"I know." Will breathes, "I'll watch the bowels."

What have they done to me?

Hannibal turns back to Pazzi to find his face frozen in a mask of horror. His brown eyes are huge and focused on Will. Will looks up from Pazzi's lower half to gaze solemnly into Pazzi's face.

"Hello, Rinaldo."

"What…what…" Pazzi stammers not recognizing the sound of his own voice.

Rinaldo will visit you, too.

Tier's voice drifts across the table as his .eyes sweep over Pazzi's torso.

Maybe. Not like you…

Will resumes slicing through Pazzi's fleshy abdomen, the layer of fatty tissue presenting a challenge. He looks to Hannibal for guidance.

"Peel with your left as you cut with your right. Like filleting a fish without touching the bone."

"Much better."

Pazzi opens his mouth to scream but all that escapes are weak grunts. The screaming continues in his head while Lecter talks. Somehow he manages to pay attention as the dreamy far away feeling returns and he feels a sense of calm with the floating. He decides he won't look at Graham or what he is doing.

"Rinaldo…That's right. Don't look at Will. I asked if you talked to Jack Crawford."

"Allegra…" His wife's name slips from his lips like drool as he rolls his eyes at Hannibal.

"She's not here. She never was. She's with the FBI. In Siena."

Pazzi's eyes roll up in his head as he considers Lecter's response. Thoughts keep tumbling around, too many things and they tumble…tumble.

Crawford. Crawford knew Allegra was safe and didn't tell me. Why?

"Does Jack know you are here?"

Pazzi blinks. "He…he lied." Pazzi coughs, he can't seem to croak out a word without coughing. "He lied…to find…you."

"Yes. Jack figured out you were at the slaughter house. You would have to finish off me and Will if you wanted the reward. So Jack did what the FBI always does. He used you."

"You…lied to get…me here."

"I lied to Allegra. I'm sorry for that. I don't like to lie but we all lie, don't we, Rinaldo?"

Pazzi's eyes roll to Graham. He realizes Graham has opened him up from ribs to pelvis. And he keeps cutting. He feels the burning ice tearing through his flesh, can see Graham's hand take the scalpel through the bloody tangle of pubic hair. The implications should terrify him, and he is terrified but he can't bring himself to care that Graham might just slice him clear to his asshole.

He wets his lips and the room seems smaller now; darkness covers the ceiling and walls, his vision reduced to Lecter, Graham, and the sight of his riven chest cavity.

"You…take revenge on me…like the Medici."

"Yes." Hannibal says.

"Ima cop. Is my job…to catch…or kill you."

"Your occupation is incidental. You've behaved very badly, Rinaldo."

The tears continue to stream from the corners of his eyes, Pazzi can feel the slow trickle of drops over his ears as stares at Graham, who stares at him from the other end of the table. Death is unavoidable now he knows, but it is not the prospect of death that unnerves him. It is the process of dying that sends his eyes watering. He thinks he does not want to linger any longer.

He looks imploringly at Graham but he finds no tenderness there. For all Crawford's talk of empathy, Graham leans over the table stone faced and still as a statue and Pazzi thinks perhaps Graham isn't looking at him at all.

He looks up at Lecter who tears himself away from his lover boyfriend. The brows rise inquiringly and the compelling eyes hold Pazzi's gaze.

"Just…kill me now. Be done with it…*per favore*."

Hannibal swipes a finger across Pazzi blood smeared cheek, "Tears, Rinaldo? For whom do you weep?"

"*May you weep and wail to all eternity, for I know you, hell-dog, filthy as you are*." Will says, setting down the scalpel.

He looks over Pazzi's ruined body with clinical detachment. A gaping fissure opens between ribs and pelvis, Pazzi's cock dangles from the torn flesh like an afterthought of creation, a bit of unnecessary punctuation left at the end of superfluous sentence.

"*Indignant spirit, I kiss you as you frown*. Your contempt flows from a Dantesque perspective, Will."

"There is no pity in hell."

"Nor in Paradise. You've been purged of the sin of pity. You have become like Beatrice, untouched by anguish and the flames of your burning have no more power to keep you.

"*Who is more arrogant in his soul than one who dares to sorrow at God's judgement*?"

"Not I. Did Homer's gods weep? Did Ovid's? Sorrow and compassion are housed in our mortal tabernacles. Detachment springs from scorn born of angel's wings."

"Dante's imago of Beatrice guided him out of Purgatory into Paradise." Will says. "Does God feel sorrow?"

"Not for His own judgement. Pity is self-indulgent. It is compassion with the desire to bestow mercy. A desire to relieve the suffering of another. This you understand. Sorrow, like joy, is experienced as a feeling without the impulse to act. To feel sorrow for an unrealized act is also self-indulgent."

"Pity has no placed at the table and sorrow has no place in the garden." Will says staring at the feeble form faltering as they speak. "His mind is his own place, let him make in it heaven or hell."

"He's on his way to one of them now." Hannibal says, "His eyes have closed. But, we haven't been talking about Pazzi, have we?"

Will straightens up, cracks his neck and moves to lean over Pazzi's chest, Hannibal's head already positioned over the rib cage. Will hangs his head so his forehead brushes against the silky locks that frame the impertinent face. Hannibal knows him so well.

"God does not sorrow for his own judgment, Will. Not even the judgements he pronounces on Himself."

You bring out the Hannibal you want to see. I felt it. Maybe…you should allow him to do the same for you.

The heart is shielded by the sternum. By the time Will cracks through the thick plate of bone that houses that most precious organ, Pazzi's heart will be still. Will stares into the chest cavity and imagines lifting Pazzi's heart from its cradle of veins and arteries to hold in his hands. It pulses wet and warm as Hannibal leans in for a bite.

But Love awakened her, and of my heart, aflame, he humbly made her, fearful, taste…

"I'll use bolt cutters." Will says shaking the visions away. "Jack will be here soon."

Pazzi shudders, barely drawing breath. Blessed blackness descends as the voices of his tormentors drift away. He floats weightless in his pool…

Hannibal glances down, inhales recognizing the scent of death about Pazzi's lips.

"Perhaps he walks with Allegra." Will says as Hannibal withdraws.

“His Beatrice.” Hannibal says. He thinks it a short walk from Purgatory to Paradise.

The first courtyard of the palazzo is exactly how Jack remembers it. His memory of that visit is largely reduced to emotions now. He had walked the decorated rooms with Bella and his gaze had been riveted to the beauty on his arm rather than on the walls and ceilings.

The security guard has informed him that the only live feed available to view is of the entrances. To review footage recorded in the last hour or so will require a trip to the Uffizi. Jack was also assured that all is quiet in the palazzo though the *Polizia* officer Jack was to meet seems to have gotten lost and is perhaps indulging himself. The custodians working tonight have walkie talkies and the security is sure he would have been alerted if anything were amiss.

Jack had suggested checking in with them to see if that was indeed the case. A couple of custodians had responded, the rest were assumed to be off site, enjoying a break and some dinner.

Jack makes it to the Putto and Dolphin fountain when he hears music. Beethoven is playing beneath the tarp covered ladder in the next courtyard. He thinks Beethoven’s Fifth is likely not on any of the custodian’s playlists. He taps the Walther in his jacket and walks briskly to the ladder, checking the entrances to hallways and the staircase.

The tarp, ladder, and the music all seem unassuming but the smell of decomposing viscera hits him before he reaches ladder to lift the tarp. His eyes are assaulted by the sight of entrails and assorted viscera oozing down the ladder. Most arresting are the cock and balls nailed to the metal step. They were deliberately placed at eye level. He thinks this is Hannibal’s sense of humor at its most base. Jack is sure Will would recognize the intended pun and it occurs to Jack that the pun is probably intended for Will. Will may even be in on the joke. Jack thinks since these aren't the wife's innards dripping down the ladder that the cock at eye level is meant as a slap in the face.

What is clear is that Pazzi would have assumed these were his wife’s organs slipping all over the ladder. Shaken and horrified, he wouldn’t have noticed the genitalia right away. This was a shock tactic designed to upset and incite. He tries to imagine what Pazzi would have done next. His eyes fall upon the poster next to the ticket office.

Dine with the Medici…What the Fuck? Oh Jesus…give me a break…

Jack rubs his face with his hands. He turns around and looks at the grand staircase. Pazzi is in one of the rooms in the *Quartieri Monumentali* and he went up these stairs to get there. Jack walks to the right, it doesn’t really matter which side, he’ll have to check both. Look and see if any evidence was trailed along the steps. See if Hannibal, or Will – he adds, left any more bloody mementoes lying around.

He finds a pair of glasses on the fourth step. They remind Jack of the sort Will wears, or used to wear. Will hasn’t worn his glasses in front of him the entire time Jack has been in Florence. Mostly a prop, Jack considers Will’s therapy with Clayton may have had something to do with Will’s changed appearance. Slipping the glasses in his pocket, he leaves the other possibilities on the back burner as he mounts the steps, eyes peeled below and above him as he rounds the spiral.

A white custodial cap sits a few steps up and jack picks it up unconcerned with leaving prints on it as he was with leaving his prints on the glasses. He turns the cap over and finds a single strand of dark brown hair. He frees it from the fabric and it immediately coils in his palm.

Will.

Pazzi and Will tussled on the steps. One chased the other up. Maybe Hannibal, too. He stuffs the cap in his jacket pocket. It doesn't quite fit but at least his hands are free. He pulls the PPK from its holster and continues his way up the steps. He reaches the landing and gives it the once over before stepping out into the *Sala dei Cinquecento.*

He makes a cursory sweep of the hall. He is alone in the silence. It is impossible not to gaze around. The murals are colorful and huge and the ceiling panels so extravagant in their excess that only the blind would miss them. It is when he turns his gaze to the floor that Jack actually smiles.

Blood. Dark droplets of it have been smeared along the polished surface by shoes sliding around in a scuffle. Jack's head jerks up from the floor and he looks around the hall for cameras. He counts several. Will had to know about the cameras. The recorded footage will either exonerate him or condemn him. As Jack stares down again at the blood, he thinks the latter.

Pazzi had told him he would shoot to defend himself. And, that if he crossed paths with either Hannibal or Will that he would phone. Jack had not believed Pazzi, of course, but since Jack received no phone call and there have no reports of gunshots, he thinks Pazzi might have been better off if he had done either or even both. As it is, except for evidence of a struggle, Jack has only a working theory.

If Hannibal was recreating an ugly episode from Pazzi's ancestral past, the exhibit under construction would present the obvious stage. He had sent Pazzi a dinner invitation with an allusion to his wife, or a version of her name on it. History writes that the offending Pazzi were hung outside the windows of the palazzo, the spilling of entrails an added embellishment, but the exaggerated imagery persists. One of the Pazzi was dug up, the corpse dragged through the streets of Florence to be thrown in the Arno. Jack doubts that option made it to Hannibal's table.

More than likely, Hannibal intentionally riled up Pazzi with images of his wife gracing the table of the FBI's most wanted cannibal. Whatever the trap Hannibal and, likely Will, have set for Pazzi, it will play into fears Hannibal has already elicited.

Jack scratches at the whiskers along his mouth as he looks around the hall, momentarily at a loss. He berates himself for forgetting to grab a floor map of the palazzo. The *Quarieri Monumentali* are on this floor, but Jack isn't sure which corridor to take. He looks toward the front of the hall where rows of chairs have been arranged for a lecture, various doors and entrances line either side of the hall from the huge windows at the front to the huge windows at the back. He turns around to check out the statue behind him.

It's a Michelangelo. Art and art history are not Jack's forte but he knows a little about Michelangelo and he knows the narcissist in Hannibal identifies with the titan of Renaissance art. His drawings attest to his aspirations toward the master's stylistic sensibilities. He associates the artist or his work with Will. Jack shakes his head and wonders if there is anything Hannibal does not associate with Will.

Jack sighs reaches for his phone and thinks he is beyond fatigued. He clicks on Google and quickly finds floor plans adequate to steer him in the right direction. As it so happens, he is facing the corridor that leads to the very rooms he wants.

Slipping the phone back into his pocket and thanking God for the internet, he walks down the narrow corridor and grips the doorknob of the only door in sight. He swallows hard, his heart already kicked up a notch. Having been outmaneuvered by Hannibal before, Jack is being extra special cautious. He opens one door quietly letting it open wide into the hall. Nothing. He opens the other door and goes through the process of securing the room.

There is only one light source and it comes from a floor lamp located on the far side of the room, shade and bulb facing the floor leaving the ceiling in darkness and the frescoed walls in shadow. Tiny figures grace the frescoes. Jack stares at the figures twisting in unnatural positions, some human some not. Ugly bestial creatures, part human part animal. Jack suspects the figures are part of a narrative, parodies or fables popular at the time.

The room contains boxes and assorted furniture, a couple of painter's panels have been wheeled to a corner. There is another set of double doors on the other side of the room and Jack heads for it, slowly. He hears nothing but his own breathing. His skin prickles beneath his damp shirt as he holds his weapon in front of him.

He turns the doorknob and pulls one door open wide. Music. Flutes, violins…a guitar. Vivaldi. Blood. The scent of it is everywhere. It's enough to let him know he found the right room. He turns to the only source of light. The sight he beholds renders him speechless.

My God, Will…what have you done? What…did you let him do?

Pazzi is completely nude. He has been secured to a dining table, presumably one separated from the line of tables Jack can see along the windows overlooking the courtyard. The table has been turned on its side so that Pazzi could be mounted upon it like a bas-relief sculpture. Rope has been secured around his neck like a noose so that his upper body is held in place. His legs have also been bound, spread eagle, to the table. Pazzi is attached to the table by his legs and neck and by a cord of rope wrapped around the lower half of his exposed ribcage. This is because the rope also secures arms that have been bent so that his hands plunge into his own chest, fingers curled around the flaps of flesh and cracked bone as though Pazzi had split himself apart. And split he is. Pazzi's entire torso has been opened up from breastbone to his privates, his rib cage opened up to display what constitutes a full frontal view. The organs glisten beneath the overhead light as they protrude from the cavity.

In contrast to the gore and the cruelty the sight of the body conjures, Pazzi's face is serene. Like a battered saint he looks to the ceiling, his eyes closed, nose bloodied and broken. Jack decides he was drugged and the thought that he was carved up like this while semi-conscious turns his stomach.

I knew it was going to be bad…but this…

The organs have shifted somewhat, are shifting still Jack realizes. Gravity will soon do its work. Blood covers the tarps considerately laid out over the floors to protect the finish. Tarps and painter's panels cover just about everything, the concern for the museum ridiculously effusive and so typical of Hannibal.

As Jack stares with slackened jaw and gripping his PPK tightly he considers the probability that this monstrosity represents a joint effort. Hannibal's signature fascination with organs is present as is the theater, the field kabuki as Will had so eloquently described Cassie Boyle's tableau. But Jack can see Will's hand in it, too. And Jack realizes he has been seeing Will's hand all along, whether as Hannibal's inspiration, intended recipient, or as active participant. The proof is right here.

The similarities between the tableau Hannibal made of Will and this are painfully obvious. Will had been chained up, naked, the scar of his gutting in plain view. He had received no sympathy from Pazzi, only derision and accusations. The accusations had apparently been dead on, but Pazzi's callousness at the time had added insult to injury. Will has engaged in a little quid pro quo of his own.

There is also presentation to consider. One of the key components of the serial killer's signature.

Hannibal's theater is a commentary on bad manners and visually shocking. This is certainly shocking, but there is pathos here in the *Contrapasso* chosen for Pazzi. No matter Will's personal feelings for Pazzi, he had been incapable of ignoring Pazzi's feelings. His empathy guided his design. This was Will's punishment, not Hannibal's. Will's influence on Hannibal would be significant even if it was limited to Hannibal sharing the spotlight with him. But the influence is not limited. It is immeasurable. They…are a murder couple. And they are evolving.

Geography had nothing to do with the change in Hannibal's tableaux except to provide the setting. The underlying reasons for Hannibal's pathology have not changed, but his inspiration has. Hannibal left the Ripper behind for Will.

Jack snaps out of his paralysis and steps inside, leaving the other door where it is and turning his gun upon the other set of doors adjacent to him finds no one there. He inches closer to Pazzi, to the tableau he tells himself. The museum has become a crime scene, another chapter in the palazzo's long and violent history. Fitting perhaps that this became the chosen venue given that this is not the first murder committed in the palazzo, but Jack thinks it may be the most celebrated.

As Jack examines the exposed body cavity he takes inventory of the organs he can see. His eyes skim over the glossy organs and halt on the heart. It has been sliced in half suspended between the lungs by the aorta, like a split apple hanging from a tree.

The music cranks up suddenly full blast, the strumming of the guitar replaced by booming bass and electronic screeching that sends Jack's hands to his ears, weapon pointing to the ceiling.

"Fuck!"

"Hello, Jack"

Hannibal's voice. But Jack can't tell from which direction because of the noise. The other set of doors bursts open and Jack wheels around, aims and fires without a second thought.

The music stops abruptly and Jack nearly drops his PPK. He manages to keep it level as he fights down the bile that rises in his throat.

No. No. No…

He forces himself to look at the body on the floor. It's a woman. And Jack has blown her face clean off.

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 87

Michelangelo and Cavalieri were not lovers, though Michelangelo would very much have liked that. The sculptures intended for the tomb of Pope Julius II were his "Slaves" or "Prisoners" group, the twisting truncated masses of masculine flesh bursting from stone. If that's not homoerotic I don't know what is. Neither the Slaves nor Genius of Victory made to the tomb. (Moses did.) The intended symbolism is left to conjecture.

However, Michelangelo managed to slip quite a lot of homoerotic subject matter into the Vatican. (I wonder why that was so easy…) Genius of Victory can be dated to the time of Michelangelo's work on the sculptures for Julius' tomb (1532-34), Julius had died in 1513, and sketches of Victory appear in drawings that accompany the 1532 contract for the commission. Michelangelo's relationship with Julius was fractious, he had argued with Julius earlier, in 1508 when he was commissioned to paint the Sistine Chapel. They argued for the next four years over the nudes until the chapel was completed in 1512. We can see who won the argument. Vasari is responsible for the statue's placement in the Palazzo Vecchio after Michelangelo's death.

Will's suggestion that the piece had been intended as a symbol of Florentine or Humanist superiority has merit but an allegory of victorious Florence wouldn't have pleased the Vatican either. Hannibal's take on the piece is much more plausible (and delicious). Michelangelo met Tommaso Cavalieri in 1532, the same year attributed to Genius of Victory (1532 -1534) and to the drawings Michelangelo sent to him as gifts. (The Rape of Ganymede, The Punishment of Tityus, and The Fall of Phaeton) Michelangelo left Florence for Rome in 1534 and never returned. Cavalieri was a Roman nobleman. Michelangelo had been recruited by the Vatican.

A close reading of Michelangelo's sonnets also reveals Michelangelo's poignant appeals to the object of his affections and his life long struggle to accept his longings and transform his love into something divine and transcendent. Many of the sonnets point to Cavalieri as having complete domination over Michelangelo, as though Michelangelo were powerless to resist him, ergo the Genius of Victory. I paired the Doom sonnet with Victory for Hannibal and Will.

Michelangelo's perception of Cavalieri parallels Dante's perception of Beatrice. Dante had personally canonized his departed Beatrice, dead long before he wrote his Divine Comedy. Dante was also a favorite poet of Michelangelo. Go figure.

Hannibal and Will quote from Doom of Beauty, Michelangelo (two different translations are fused for effect.) and later, in Will's dream, Sonnet 15, John Frederick Nims translation. Hannibal's seering arrows line was lifted from Sonnet 39 and altered for effect.

The references to the eagle and Ganymede: Will and Hannibal quote from Purgatorio, Canto IX

Oh human race, born to fly upward, wherefore at a little wind dost thou so fall? Purgatorio, Canto XII Will and Hannibal continue to quote from this Canto.

Lethe is the river where memories of mortal sins are washed from the soul and Eunoe is the fifth and last river in Purgatory, to drink from its waters imbues the soul with memories of good deeds performed in life so the soul, having been purged of its sins in Lethe, can fully embrace goodness and enter Paradise.

One cannot be surprised when the fig tree produces figs. Always ask of a thing what is it in itself; what is its nature. Hannibal is paraphrasing Marcus Aurelius in Meditations, Book VIII.

The secret panel in the Room of Lorenzo the Magnificent actually exists and many of the rooms in the Quartieri Monumentali have been used as dining rooms but the idea that the Florentines of Cosimo's I time dined there or that the passage behind the panel leads to a kitchen downstairs is purely speculation on my part. I have made some minor embellishments to Palazzo Vecchio to accommodate the story.

Will quotes: Who is more arrogant in his soul than one who dares to sorrow at God's judgement? Inferno, Canto XX

Will and Hannibal borrow from Dante:
So I did turn, my soul still fugitive from death's surviving image, to stare down that pass that none had ever left alive. Inferno, Canto I
Mankind sees in the heavens alone the source of all things good and evil… Purgatorio, Canto XV
May you weep… Indignant spirit… Inferno, Canto VIII
I am so made by God's all-seeing mercy your anguish does not touch me, and the flame of this great burning has no power upon me. Paradisio, Canto II

Next Up: Jack and Hannibal Round Two. And Bedelia. Guess she had it coming.

Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

> Jack contemplates his mortality: Hannibal and Jack Round Two. And God sends Adam to vex Eve in the garden.
>
> “A life is made of moments. What moment are we in now?” Hannibal says with another flash of light.
>
> Hannibal’s eyes narrow ever so slightly, and Jack recognizes the anticipatory tic for what it is. His finger trembles upon the trigger, resolve dissipating like steam. His mouth goes dry as he looks at Hannibal’s hands now drawn into fists. He realizes Hannibal has been signaling Will to do…what?
>
> “What’s it going to be, Will?” Jack says. “You going to shoot me? Or him?”
>
> He turns from Hannibal in anticipation of the splatter he hopes will erupt when the bullet, his or Will’s, enters Hannibal’s skull.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 88

Jack contemplates his mortality: Hannibal and Jack Round Two. And God sends Adam to vex Eve in the garden.

Eclissi (Eclipse) Roberto Ferri

And a sweet melody filled the bright air – so sweet that I reproached in righteous zeal Eve's fatal recklessness. How could she dare? One woman alone, made but a moment since – all heaven and earth obedient, to refuse the one veil willed by High Omnipotence; beneath which, had she stayed God's acolyte, I should have known before then, and for longer those raptures of ineffable delight.

Purgatorio Canto XXIX Dante's *Divine Comedy*

The crack of Jack's Walther is deafeningly loud but the discharge of the single bullet is no match for the thunderbolts hurled into the night. Heat lightning is a common occurrence during the humid Tuscan summer and while Hannibal had assisted in rearranging Pazzi to align with Will's inspired *contrapasso* the heavens had shimmered florescent with the advance of low hanging clouds. The shimmers had become flashes; the chase of light through the clouds had carried the promise of impending rain. Will's vision and gun had shifted with the movement of Jack's gun toward Hannibal but with the loud music the double doors to Leo X's room had burst open and Jack's gun had exploded on the doors. The sky had resonated not with Jack's shot, but booms of thunderous applause followed by another sizzling flash of light.

Moments before Jack had opened the door and stepped inside the room of *Lorenzo il Magnifico* with his weapon drawn, a mighty clap of thunder had rumbled and the heavens had opened accordingly rending the sky with grumbling echoes and unfurling sheets of rain. And with the rumbles *Signora Carbone*'s shadow had moved beneath double doors of Leo X's room next door.

Hannibal had turned from opportunity shuffling on the other side of the heavy wood to look at Will, bloody hands buried in a rag.

Have you ever imagined what would have happened had Jack not come early to dinner?

Hannibal had turned from the corrupted flesh rent by the hands stuffed in terrycloth; hands he would have rend his soiled clothes and rip them from enflamed flesh too long parted from their caress. Wiping the taint of their shared prey from his fingers with an equally soiled towel, he had struck the naked notes that had hung between them, haunted echoes from a past that had never been except in Will's imagination.

Will had looked down at his feet, wriggling toes recently released from loafers caked with blood, his imagination already at work compulsively painting pictures while his fingers had fondled a corner of the blood stained cloth.

Before or after I knew Abigail was there? Maybe the question you want to ask is: did I imagine coming to dinner at all.

Will had looked aside and had resumed kneading his rag, mouth curving infuriatingly obstinate. Forgiven but not forgotten; Hannibal had stolen Abigail from Will, twice. The promise of that particular bloom had faded as the rosy blush of life had drained from Abigail's face before his eyes. A life without regret…

Wishing to avoid the thorn on that tender flower, Hannibal had rephrased accordingly.

Circumstances have brought the three of us to the table again. You may be purged of pity, but affection…is often inconvenient.

The words had drawn a genuine smile across the bruised lips, bow to string, another sweet note to strike Hannibal's chest. Will had tossed his rag aside; eyes once again level with Hannibal's. Hannibal had stepped closer, the magnetism of Will's gaze a force all its own capable of wrenching his heart in two as easily as impelling his feet across the floor.

You should take Pazzi's gun…just in case. Will had said.

Hannibal had edged closer still so the heat between them might ignite. Fingers had found their way through the thicket of soft curls to draw the bowed head to his chest. He had brushed the fragrant curls with his nose as his lips had caressed ears that flushed warm with the touch.

I need to know that if the moment comes…will you do what needs to be done?

Will had looked to the sets of double doors, a handful of breeze ruffling the tangle of curls at his neck, a flash of lightning revealing the fretful brow.

Can you pull the trigger on Jack? Hannibal had said to the bowed head. *Circumstances may require the cup passes to you.*

All things are possible for you; let this particular cup pass from me….

Scripture and appeal had spilled from split lips to flow like warm whiskey over cracked ice, profane and unexpected. Hannibal had gripped Will's neck, thumb guiding chin back to him to remind the pilgrim of the poet but the beseeching look in those pale blue eyes had drilled deeply. His chest had seemed to wince as though Will's fingers had reached into his chest and had ripped the lingering dark thoughts of that blood soaked night from his heart.

From the seeds of trust had sprouted another fragile flower. Will's eyes had locked onto Hannibal's and God had not been able to resist his Adam quoting Christ in the garden.

And shall I take that bitter cup from you?

If I must I will drink even to its dregs.

That, being all Hannibal had needed to hear; he had taken Will's upturned face in his hands and had drunk deeply from that cup. One hand had held a fistful of curls in the back of his head and the other had gripped the tender jaw so Will had been momentarily immobilized as Hannibal had lavished the eager mouth with encouragement. Will had clasped Hannibal's neck struggling within the vice that held him captive, fighting for breath and dominance. And for the growl of delight Will's struggling caused, Hannibal had been even more generous with his encouragements.

Will had wrenched away to turn his head toward the door, attention and thoughts focused on Jack's impending arrival and clearly distracted by the possible outcomes streaming behind his eyes. A life is made of moments and the moments Hannibal shares with Will are among the most joyous. Provided, of course, Will is actually in the moment with him. Hallucinations, retreats, and drug induced stupors excepted.

Not yet comfortable with your instincts to relax and enjoy yourself?

A doleful rolling of eyes. Will's mouth had folded upon itself into that curious line resembling a frown but for the creases carved like parentheses into his cheeks.

My instinct is to avoid being surprised. Will had breathed into his face as Hannibal had lifted his chin.

Hmmmm. Do not seek for things to happen the way you want them to; hope that what happens happen the way it does.

Sounds like a recipe for complacency. Isn't that approach contrary to your acts of persuasion?

The bruised lips had teased his jaw. So infuriating…

Persuasion is an exercise in hope. I'm not endorsing inaction or action but an acceptance of the moment.

More Meditations?

Stoic inspiration. I was thinking Nietzsche.

Of course you were…

Amor fati. The love of Fate. Contentment with a single moment is difficult for you – you can exist in so many at once.

His concept of eternal recurrence. Will had said, understanding dawning behind translucent blue like a sunrise breaking upon the sea. *We exist in the best of all possible worlds because every configuration of life exists simultaneously.*

From every moment there runs an eternity backwards. Must not whatever can happen of all things have already happened? This…you understand. What did you say to Daniel in that tearful embrace *at his house?*

I don't know what is going to happen, but whatever happens is supposed to happen.

If everything already exists then… this moment too has already existed. Will had said slowly.

And from this moment extends a course forward. Whatever can run its course of all things also in this moment outward it must once more run. Through eternity. Hannibal had said.

The Ourobors… is a symbol of that eternal recurrence.

Will's face had gone slack, a blank canvas for the associations sent spinning in his skull. Gone to that place where his golden grains of sand glitter forever. For all Will's physical charms, it is his mind that ever fascinates. Hannibal knows he has never found nor will he ever find anything more beautiful.

We are just alike, Will. Your acceptance of Fate at the slaughter house only the beginning of a moment stretching backward and forward.

Jack may very well kill us, but he can't harm us.

Then let me die next, avenged of my enemy rather than abide here by the beaked ships, a scorn and burden of the earth.

Will's hands had moved up his sleeve as he had brushed Hannibal's whiskered chin with warm breath and lingering lips.

You? A scorn and burden of the earth?

Hannibal had taken the battered blossoms again, pliant petals so dear and sweet Hannibal had made a meal of the mischievous mouth made all the more tempting by the suggestive squirming unleashed below. A moment of bliss had been granted to Achilles and his impetuous Patroclus.

Until Hannibal had unleashed chaos by simply playing with the stereo. Opportunity to experience *amor fati* with Will.

Splintered bone and blood paint the polished doors in a spray of scarlet. The searing bullet likely hit the aged molding and pearlescent crimson drips from the varnished wood. Hannibal's lips curl with disdain. The bullet is lodged so deeply it will be impossible to extract without damaging the original architecture. Hannibal supposes escaping from the palazzo without some degree of collateral damage is to be expected. How much collateral depends largely on Will.

He looks to the immobile form behind his panel. Will's mouth hangs open, mind reeling from the silent screams hanging in the air. Screams that speak to Will all too clearly. Hannibal has introduced his cup of chaos. Unfortunately, Jack has managed to spill the cup all over the floor. And the cub will want to clean it up.

The odor of gunfire permeates. The metal scented mist fills his nostrils as Will watches Jack's face crumble in confusion from his position behind the painter's panel. It's obvious the *Signora* is not dead. This complicates things as Hannibal knew it would the moment his finger had touched the stereo. Will's jaw cranks side to side as he wonders when exactly Hannibal had decided to set up this moment.

The *Signora* had been a random element and like the elements raging outside the window, Hannibal had seized opportunity and hurled it like a thunderbolt. Will realizes Jack had shot low, not intending a head shot. If it had been him coming through the double doors, Jack would have nailed him in the shoulder, again.

Instead, the bullet had ripped through the lower half of the *Signora's* face taking teeth, cheek, and chin with it. Head and facial wounds are especially bloody since there is so little flesh between bone and skin. *Carbone's* entire face is swathed in scarlet. Will takes no pleasure in the suffering that assaults his eyes, but for Jack's ineptitude, the *Signora* would be dead.

Her fingers claw at her face catching the scourge of serpents writhing in the matted hair. She is Medusa with a gaping gash where her mouth should be.

Such a terrible form to look upon.

Shadows shift in the corners drawing Will's eyes from the blood splattered door way, the familiar form cringes as it draws closer, its eyes dance like yellow embers above a fire. Black talons steal across the frost crusted floor to wind about his neck but Will feels only the barest wisp of feathers as the creature whispers from the dark.

The jaws of Hades have opened up in your garden, Will.

Yes. There lies mad Discord upon the floor... her snaky hair entwined with blood-wet ribbons.

The verse distills upon his tongue and Will presses his lips together to keep the crazy from spilling out as he blinks the plumes from his face. He rolls his eyes to Hannibal, hoping it's not obvious he is hallucinating yet again. He's not in a position to share and attempting to alert him could be disastrous. He grips his Berretta more tightly, eyes focused on the downed assistant curator and the hovering Jack.

Curious it is Aeneas' vision of Hades that comes to your mind. Rather a step back down your mountain, isn't it?

More a detour, I think.

The constant shower of rain is hypnotic. Everything seems to slow around him, an eternal pause captured in the crash of light and the quake of thunder.

Well, the path back to hell is easy. To retrace your steps, the woods cover the middle part and Cocytus is around it, sliding in dark coils.

I don't want to go back.

Yet you falter in your dark wood. The Signora has plucked a discordant note. Pazzi did not.

No. Pazzi summoned an entire orchestra of contempt, but this…

It's a miserable sight writhing about on the floor. Will wants to fire his weapon, end her suffering. He does not need a conferring glance from Hannibal to know he cannot. The Hannibal in his head offers confirmation enough.

No room for pity at the table, Will. You must control your passions.

He knows he could halt the thrashing of limbs with one shot but he would give away his position to Jack and a second gunshot may not be necessary. The walkie talkie remains silent; the lack of chatter suggesting security has not been alerted. He thinks talking Jack down might be the more productive path and he looks to Hannibal, lowers his gun and raises a brow.

Still having trouble with transitions? Or is Purgatory lonely without your infernal apparitions?

The shrunken crippled wings draped over his shoulder belong to the creature, but the cadence and the penchant for rhyme belong to Will's cherished imago, the fractured phantom of Hannibal's better self. Despite the disorienting teeter totter his hallucination inspires, Will welcomes his wrathful warrior. Hannibal's voice is rich and low as he chuckles softly in Will's ear, the slip of fingers through his hair sending his scalp to tingling. Sweat trickles through stitches and whiskers but Will dares not move, and the impulse to swipe his chin across his shoulder is forgone in favor of vigilance. He greets his happy warrior.

Come to keep me company in this, my solitary night? Are you my path through the wood? My faint guiding light?

You cannot enter Paradise with eyes darkened by any mist. Would that my tongue bathes the foulness from your face, a flower freshly kissed.

The awful talons at his throat crumble like clay and Will almost laughs watching the useless feathers float to ivy laced ice, slipping over his Berretta to gather at his feet. He feels the tickle of flaxen braids fall upon his neck and the crush of soft lips against his cheek.

There are monsters in the mist.

The flames of your inferno fade from sight; my wings, like your wings, they wither, no longer capable of flight. Do you see the garden, Will?

Almost.

Then what discord is this, my tardy wayward spirit? By what negligence, what idling causes thee to linger as we draw near it?

The ghostly hand continues to rest upon his shoulder, weightless yet warm. Ivy climbs the walls of Lorenzo's elegant room, more a grotto as the murals disappear into the twining thicket of green and Will's eyes follow the trail of vines to Jack.

"No…no…no." Jack mumbles under his breath.

The bulky shoulders heave as Jack attempts to shake off his unforgivable faux pas, his disorientation already waning. As far as Hannibal is aware, Jack has never taken down the wrong target and his mind is right now shuffling the repercussions of his actions. He's appalled and angry but his training is kicking in. His first impulse will be to pull the trigger again on the next thing that moves. But reason will trump emotion because Jack knows there are two predators in the room and he'll have sights on only one of them. Hannibal glances at the other predator.

By switching off the music he had changed the tempo of the melody. Change was necessary. Will plays a sonata, but a lively scherzo is what he needs and unwittingly solicits as he turns vibrant blue fire upon Hannibal. Hannibal always endeavors to provide Will with what he needs, but transitions remain troublesome and Hannibal has introduced an especially slippery quandary for Will. To take a life without justifiable provocation rankles, it shines in the exquisite blue eyes transparent as glass.

In that glass, Hannibal sees the pilgrim contemplating his dark wood forgetful that he had all but forged his own path through Purgatory. Paradise stretches before him drawn by the poet's own hand, scarlet ink across the page. An appeal to the poet is required to prod the tentative pilgrim along his path.

Hannibal steps from behind his panel to greet the grim faced Jack despite the heated blaze of blue and advances toward Jack, his face arranged in a mask of confident cool. Lightning illuminates the room and Hannibal counts the intervening seconds until thunder rolls, hands at his sides and retracting fingers as he counts so Will can see.

One thousand one, one thousand two…

Will can do nothing but watch from behind his panel as Hannibal serves up another helping of chaos. Hannibal wants his dinner with Jack and one way or another he is determined to have it. He grips the Berretta in both hands and resumes his stance. He sees Hannibal's fingers count off the seconds until the thunderclap. He also sees the conceit. He sighs, teeth kneading at sore lips as Achilles closes on Menelaus to confront him face to face instead of from behind his panel. Achilles is placing an awful lot of faith in him. Patroclus hasn't practiced at a range in a very long time.

Patroclus! Thy Achilles knows no fears. Nor taunts from Zeus, nor oracles he hears.

I know. The objective is to disarm Jack…

Out of the vacuum of surreal silence the sound of footsteps filter through the sting of recriminations in Jack's head. The PPK quakes hot in his hands, barrel still smoking as his body absorbs the shock and the horror from which his mind recoils. Forced collateral he thinks watching the ravaged visage sputter for air, limbs shaking helplessly.

"Been expecting you, Jack."

Jack whirls his weapon toward the voice to stare into the face he has not seen in over a year and emotions erupt fresh as though Jack stands in Hannibal's kitchen again.

Hello, Jack. You're early.

I couldn't wait to get here.

Would you care to sous-chef?

His eyes and the barrel greet Hannibal at the same time as another clap of thunder explodes outside. Jack recalls it was raining that night in Baltimore, too. The museum uniform glows with the next flash of light, no longer pristine white but smeared with stains of the massacred flesh mounted behind him. Jack's mouth twists into a scowl. He knows his last shot was lost to the thunder. The massive structure with all its stone and brick, its thick walls and ceilings plastered with art and tapestries, is as impervious to sound as it is an assault.

Nostrils quiver with the scent of Jack's acidic sweat coupled with stale smoke, his cologne so faded Hannibal cannot recognize it. Jack is fatigued, irritable, and likely carrying a roll of antacids in his pocket, or what is left of it. This is not the Jack Crawford who stepped into his kitchen. Hannibal concedes he is not quite up to snuff, either. He inhales deeply and looks down his nose at Jack's gun.

"Hands where I can see them, Hannibal."

Jack's eyes flick from left to right, from the battered visage before him to the curtained panels. He knows Will is behind one of the panels, but which one?

"Not the first time I've had a gun pointed at me." Hannibal says, raising arms slowly.

Jack thinks emptying his magazine into Hannibal's chest might cause a bit of a racket despite the storm. He steals a glance at the wretched woman choking on the floor, hands cradling what is left of her face. Jack's teeth grind with each muffled wail. The desire to send bullets into that chest and see if a heart truly beats inside is dampened by instinct. Instinct tells him he would likely receive the same from Will. Why else would Hannibal walk brazenly up to him?

Jack holds his Walther straight out unsure if Hannibal intends to finish what was started in his kitchen, unsure if Will intends to allow it. He's not sure what Will intends to allow but the horror strapped to the table suggests there is a lot of latitude. He starts to slip the other hand into his jacket pocket for his phone while he has time. If he can just tap Zee's number…

"Where's your guardian angel, Hannibal?"

"Will's no angel." Hannibal returns calmly. "But you already knew that."

Cha-ching.

Jack's head turns to the sound recognizing the tell-tale click of a gun de-cocking. Will doesn't need to de-cock his weapon, the trigger does that automatically. It's Will's way of letting him know he has Hannibal's back. And to stop reaching for his phone.

"Hands where I can see them, Jack." Hannibal says. "Quid pro quo."

Jack freezes. Slowly, very slowly he wraps the errant hand back around his wrist to steady the gun. The PPK is the only card Jack has to play. Will could have shot him already, but Jack knows how impersonal and unsatisfying a bullet would be for Hannibal. He's not so sure about Will.

After witnessing Jack's trigger finger a moment ago, Will isn't going to give up his advantage easily. But, Will's conversion to Hannibal's dark religion has been gradual and violent and Jack does not believe Will's crisis of conscience has been for show. Every offering Will has placed at Hannibal's feet has included a sacrifice of blood. The most recent offering droops from the altar behind Hannibal's head.

…this is bad for me…

Have I broken you?

Do you have anyone who does this better unbroken than I do broken?

Will was never under any illusions about how broken he is and perhaps, having made his offering and having won Hannibal's favor once again, he has arrived at a moment of truth. It has been a recurring thought that Will's agenda might be self-sacrifice. If that had been Will's plan at the slaughter house, it clearly hadn't worked out for him. If it had been Will's plan in Hannibal's kitchen, it hadn't worked out for him then, either.

Agent Crawford, I have spent considerable time helping Will reconstruct a past that, for some of the time, he spent as someone else. For you.

Jack steals a glance at Pazzi, a twinge of guilt slipping down his spine with the thought Will had become that someone else in a vacuum. An entire universe within a universe comprised of mirrors and mind games. The homage to Dante taking center stage is as much Jack's creation as it is Will's.

Dr. Lecter, I'm uh Special Agent Jack Crawford, FBI …You were referred to me by Alana Bloom in the psychology department Georgetown... Um, I need you to help me with a psychological profile…

Jack? …Whose profile is he working on?

I'm sorry, Will…

Allowing Jack to turn his weapon on him after shooting Hannibal is possible if Will sees himself as broken beyond repair. Choosing Jack as his executioner would be consistent with Will's sense of irony and, Jack has to admit, the act would leave a gaping wound in Jack for the rest of his days. Will's parting gift to him: unimaginable guilt. It's dinner around the table all over again and Jack admits he has no idea who is pursuing whom or what.

Whomever is pursuing whom in this very moment, I intend to eat them.

In this very moment, Will is not alone with Hannibal. As Jack understands it, Will's empathy is compulsive; therefore he cannot help but be affected by Jack and the recent atrocity lying on the floor. A counter-weight to Hannibal's influence in the room can't hurt.

"Hello, Will." Jack says through gritted teeth, not taking his eyes off Hannibal.

"Jack…" Will's voice floats somewhere from behind a panel, close to Pazzi.

"You're not alone in this. I'm still that bedrock when you feel yourself sinking in quicksand."

"When it's convenient…you are."

Will eases the edge of curtain aside with the Berretta's barrel just a sliver so he can better peer at Jack. He stands facing Hannibal, both of them in profile. Jack with his gun and Hannibal with his mask of indifference. Will sighs.

"You can't kill us both so put the gun down. I don't want to kill you, Jack."

"When I said I didn't want to point a gun at you ever again, I meant it. You uh…forced this on me. I don't want to kill you either."

"Good. Nobody wants to kill anybody." Will says wondering how long *that* will last.

"Well…" Hannibal says, the urge to smile irrepressible, "Will sometimes has trouble with indefinite articles. Apparently it extends to pronouns as well."

Jack cocks his head at Hannibal, decides it's an in-joke. He hopes there aren't many more; he doesn't think he can stomach them.

"Drop your gun and I'll drop mine." Will says banishing the tickle from irreverent lips.

"Come out from behind the panels and we'll talk about it." Jack says.

"Or we can drop them at the same time…how about that?" Will counters.

Jack clears his throat, or chortles, Will can't decide which.

"Uh…two against one?" Jack says, "I don't think so."

"You don't like the math?" Hannibal says, "Seems we've balanced the equation."

"No matter how you cut it; it was always two against one." Will says.

Thunder rumbles after the softly spoken words, the cadence incongruously conversational. Jack can almost hear Will's pleasant chuckle in tow. Almost. The dig hurts a little, truth flies like dirt from Will's gentle spade. Jack introduced them to each other, encouraged the pairing, and has since tried to benefit from the toxic relationship. When Will had backed off, protested, threatened to quit, Jack had thrown him back into the lion's den. Jack reminds himself Will wanted the lion. He's been hunting with the lion all evening…

Now the lions are playing with him.

Jack scans the room behind Hannibal. No sign of Will. Lightning flashes searing white, illuminating the figures behind the painter's panels. Jack is surrounded by decoys and Will could be any one of the frozen forms caught in the light from the enormous windows. His eyes shift back to Hannibal, the hissing of rain as interminable as the tic-tock of a clock.

Hannibal holds his hands up, elbows bent at the shoulders and hands angled toward his head. The gesture seems to Jack more an act of amused benevolence than of surrender. He doesn't have a kitchen knife to throw at him this time. He doesn't need one. He has Will.

"Did you come to save your broken pony, or put him down?" Hannibal lifts his chin defiant, tilts his head toward the faceless figure still sputtering on the floor. "Like you did to her."

Jack grimaces at the pursed line of the mouth, refusing to follow the mocking gaze. The entire wretched scene is revolting on so many levels.

"That was cruel, even for you." Jack snarls.

"Cruel? Where were you when Pazzi came for Will? Where was the FBI when Mason trussed him up as a treat for his pigs?"

The temptation to fire on Hannibal simply for the sanctimony tics along Jack's brow matching the simultaneous trembling at the trigger. Jack rolls his tongue around, the futility of arguing apparent and the dangling of bait transparent.

Hannibal paints his face with reproach, eyes still fixed upon the ruined *Signora.* Jack's bullet has torn through tissue on the right to come out on the left leaving shattered bone in its wake. The jagged features below the uncomprehending brown eyes that blink uncontrollably are unrecognizable. Shock impedes the nervous system; *Signora Carbone* does not feel the full extent of her injury. Her brain is coping with too many stimuli to process the pain.

The ample bosom spills from the snug dress, every heartbeat a cruel gift, every breath another moment spent in agonizing limbo. She is making quite the spectacle and while Hannibal is not concerned about Jack's comfort level, Will has enough distraction to contend with. There are other means to rattle Jack.

"We make murder and we make mercy. Seems you've made a mess of murder. But, you understand mercy quite well, don't you Jack?"

Hannibal glances to Jack's hands wrapped around his gun. Jack still wears his wedding ring, the gold of the band glimmers upon his finger.

Jack's tongue slides along the paste coating his mouth. Saliva sours on his tongue, curdling along his throat as he swallows becoming something cold coiling in his gut. He braces himself for a trip down the kind of unspeakably dark road Hannibal likes to travel, in fact seeks.

"Tell me…"

Hannibal kneels down, looking into Jack's contorted face and finding the ire his accusation was designed to provoke, begins to examine the ruined flesh beneath his fingers.

"When you killed Bella, did you increase the drip on the IV, or did you inject the overdose?"

Jack stares into eyes as deep and dark as the depths of hell and the thought that the creature born of those flames can see into his soul is as unfathomable as the pit he crawled out of. But, there is no point lying to the devil. He already knows Jack's heart.

"This isn't Bella…Don't…" Jack starts but his voice falls flat.

Jack watches mute, aware Will tracks his every move as he follows Hannibal with the barrel of his weapon. Lightning flashes, illuminating the room like a strobe and he winces at the pathetic sight on the floor, blood still gurgles from the fissure that was once her face.

"You set her up." Jack huffs.

Hannibal raises a corrective brow at the retort. "Her…or you?"

Jack's finger teases the trigger. The two of them contrived this situation. The thought that Hannibal's formidable intelligence is abetted by Will's gift is a sobering one, one that quakes in Jack, shakes him to the core.

Hannibal eases to one knee to more easily cradle the woman's head. He knows Jack won't stop him. He lifts the shattered face from the floor and twists the neck like a corkscrew.

The crack of vertebrae snapping causes Jack to flinch and his mouth drops in a belated gesture of protest. He closes his eyes in a shameful prayer of gratitude while cursing the dark angel of death before him in the same breath.

"You didn't wait long." Hannibal says, mindful of the storm.

Sudden and violent storms such as this are generally of short duration, the seconds between lightning and thunder will soon increase and then decrease quickly. Hannibal wipes the bright red blood from his hands across the stained fabric as he resumes his quid pro quo with Jack.

“Couldn’t bear watching your beloved Bella waste away.”

“I hated watching her suffer.” Jack volunteers, “But I understand why she came to you.” Jack says.

“Do you?”

Suddenly inspired, and realizing he has another card to play, Jack reaches into his breast pocket as he speaks assuming Hannibal is enjoying himself too much to refuse.

“I still have the *coq gaulois*. I carry it with me. May I?”

Hannibal’s acquiescent nod is for Will. Jack thinks if Hannibal is going to drag Bella into this, then perhaps he can walk down this dark road with Hannibal and offer Will a way out if he wants it.

He grips the cool coin bearing the rooster of the French Revolution between trembling fingers knowing the significance for Bella had nothing to do with those lauded ideals. He extends his hand, the significance then, and now, is not lost on Hannibal either.

Hannibal stares at the gold coin in Jack’s sweaty palm.

“Fate followed Bella and touched the coin that day.” Hannibal says.

“Bella told me you moved the punctuation mark. Denied her the ending of her sentence.”

“I did not move the punctuation so much as replace it. With a question mark.” Hannibal returns. “You answered, Jack.”

Hannibal looks into the weary eyes that bore into his. Sweat glistens on Jack’s brow; the beads roll down his face and exposed neck, veins pulsing beneath the scar he bears from their last altercation. Bella used to say Jack’s face was all scars if you knew how to look. Hannibal knows how to look. All three of them bear scars from one or the other, or both. Jack wears his like he wears his badge and Hannibal allows that Jack does not perceive much difference between duty and retribution.

Hannibal’s eyes flick to Jack’s outstretched hand. “I gave it back to her. Bella left the rooster for you, didn’t she?”

Anger spikes with the savage accusation beneath the politely delivered question. Jack’s mouth goes dry tasting of the acid he had choked down when he had stripped off the tainted bed linens smelling of her perfume and decay, the golden coin tumbling from the depths of the pillow case. Bella’s unspoken prayer had sent him sobbing all over again.

“I found the coin in her pillow.” Jack admits, eyes misting despite his resolve. “She never complained…”

…there will be a time when there is nothing you can do. And I don't want you to remember me pleading with you to make the pain go away.

Oh, I'm not going to remember you that way…

Hannibal’s hands remain at his side, but the laughing eyes taunt him. Jack thinks of Hannibal’s visit to Bella in the hospital. He had returned the coin, had laid it on her pillow with an apology for breaking confidences, projecting an air of ethical responsibility that Jack had breathed without detecting the scent of hypocrisy, but Bella had.

Hi, baby.

Hey.

I'm here. I'm here.

What are you doing here?

I want to apologize. I couldn't honor what you asked of me. I'm sorry.

Get out.

Wheezing with the effort it had taken, Bella had slapped Hannibal’s face. A brazen emotional response Jack had not fully understood or appreciated at the time. Hannibal couldn’t honor Bella’s wishes because he’d been curious if Jack would. Bella had desired to spare Jack the torment she had experienced with her mother and had made the mistake of choosing Hannibal as her confessor. As the source of her courage, she had known Hannibal would understand. He had. All too well.

“Love and death are the great hinges on which all human sympathies turn.” Hannibal says, remembering his words to Bella. “I saved her for you.”

Jack’s mouth wrinkles with the pretension. He wonders if Hannibal has any idea how odious his words are or if it is the intention to add insult to injury.

“She said you helped her understand that death was not a defeat, but a cure.”

Jack closes his fingers around the weighty coin suffusing the metal with warmth, imbuing the inanimate remnant of his wife with the imitation of life.

“Socrates had believed his death would cure Athens. As he lay dying, he requested a rooster be sacrificed to Asclepius, god of healing.” Hannibal says, “Are we moving the punctuation, Jack?”

“I guess we all are. You don’t know what Will is going to do any more than I do, do you?”

“I trust Will to speak for himself. Something I have always encouraged. I think you don’t know what you are going to do.”

Jack’s eyes narrow as he considers. He can offer the cure to Will, but he can’t make Will take it. Jack thinks he could manage one shot to drop Hannibal before receiving Will’s shot. As Jack stares at Hannibal he wrestles with the idea, wondering if Will would actually fire or be grateful that Jack could do what he apparently cannot. The longer Jack thinks about it, the less likely anything resembling what Jack wants will happen.

Hannibal detects the scent of indecision. He counts the seconds between lightning and thunder knowing Will is counting, too.

“Bella’s appeal to Asclepius was heard after all.” Hannibal says, “To whom are you appealing?”

“My appeal is to Will.” Jack says.

Will cringes inwardly as the cup moves ever closer to him. Jack had told him about the hospital visit and though he has not discussed Bella since, Jack’s confession is not entirely a surprise. When Will had learned of Bella’s passing, the one scenario he had not imagined was Jack sitting idly by watching his wife wither away before his eyes. Confession is good for the soul and Jack seeks to use his constructively.

Will’s finger tenses on the trigger, imagination spinning as lightning flickers across Jack’s face and with the crash of thunder that follows, he imagines Jack lowering his gun as the murals and doors recede overtaken by the fog that thickens with the sway of the pendulum in Will’s head. Jack emerges from the mist wearing the golden armor of the Greeks armed with a long slender spear. The rooster emblazoned on his cuirass gleams bright as he drops his spear in greeting. He holds out his hand to the lovely willowy woman stepping out of the misty wood to join him. The hem of her tunic touches the ground as her feet glide across the grass. Ringlets black as night tumble from slender shoulders as she gazes at Jack with eyes that shine like obsidian but for the deep well of sadness that springs from the wan smile upon her lips.

“Will…” Jack’s words blow into Will’s dream. “I’m holding the cure for both of us.”

Associations come quickly, and Will hears the voice of his fair haired Achilles as rain becomes ocean mist and thunder rolls with the tide.

Sad Menelaus, what a desperate coin he wields, ‘tis no defeat to walk with beauteous Helen o’er Elysian Fields.

Jack is choosing to be the cure, if he can take the cancer with him.

I hear a provisional prayer, don’t you?

The gods promised Menelaus the Elysian Fields but Fate is about to disappoint him. Jack is prepared to be the sacrifice this time, but Will can’t accept his misguided offering. Menelaus and his Helen step through the fog over the body on the floor and the visage ripped by Jack’s bullet becomes Abigail’s. The pale youthful flesh splits wide beneath Will’s feeble fingers again. Futile prayers spill from feverish lips as the blood flows fervid and fast from the font in her throat. The fog lifts and Will decides it’s not a sacrifice if God didn’t ask for one.

Will slips behind another panel.

Jack’s fingers uncurl as he attempts to tender the debt once more. Will knows Hannibal will not accept payment, nor does he want it. Definitely not while the supplicant holds the instrument of Fate in his other hand.

“Keep it, Jack.” Hannibal says starting from the floor. “When Fate knocks, you and I will know.”

“Fate is knocking, Hannibal. Stay right where you are.” Jack says as Hannibal halts, shoulders hunched in anticipation.

Jack clenches the coin wondering if he has it in him. He keeps thinking of the confusing kholodets, the Ukrainian dish whose outcome can never be predicted. Determination seeps into jaws but fear licks at the hairs along his neck nonetheless. His intentions must be plain as day to Will, perhaps

Hannibal, too. The fact that Will has not already killed him leads Jack to believe Will is still conflicted, unable to pull the trigger on either one of them. Jack so very badly wants to believe…

This is Baltimore all over again.

“Were you ever my man in the room, Will?” Jack’s eyes do not leave Hannibal’s face.

“Depends on the room.”

Jack chuckles at that. “How about this room in this moment? Who is pursuing whom?”

“The nature of my pursuit has not changed, Jack.”

Will’s voice floats from Jack’s right. He didn’t see him move, but Will has moved. His eyes shift back to Hannibal. Hannibal’s fingers are splayed wide in a gesture of compliance as he stares at Jack, his face like granite as lightning flashes across the inscrutable features.

You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist.

If Will is truly lost in the reality he created with Hannibal maybe killing Hannibal is the only way to release him. Jack turns his head slightly hoping for a glimpse of the shaggy head or the glint of a gun with the flashing of light. Will’s choice: kill the monster or watch him die.

Lightning flashes across Jack’s grim face. Hannibal’s fingers fold one by one as the seconds tic by. The storm is moving quickly and the desired camouflage with it.

“A moment in isolation cannot speak to motive, intent, or aftermath.” Jack says, vaguely disturbed by the movement of Hannibal’s fingers. “We can write this any way we want, Will.”

One thousand one… One thousand two…

Thunder then silence but for the steady slapping of rain on the window sills.

The moment in isolation hangs thick like the air; life measured once again in before and after, backwards and forwards existing simultaneously in the persistent rhythm of the rain. His eyes shift to Hannibal’s hand. All the fingers are retracted now but one. Will watches the pinky finger slowly curl up.

Whatever happens…

He knows what Hannibal’s closed hand means. Time is up. The storm will move away and every subsequent clap of thunder will diminish with distance. Will finds himself sitting beside Abigail on his front porch in Wolf Trap, a remnant of a drug induced hallucination but so warm and real, it hurts.

I was always meant for you. A surrogate daughter.

For both of us. Two fathers.

But you loved me more. And he…loved you more.

You don’t know that.

Who did he choose, Will? Who did he choose?

Iphigenia's sacrifice had launched the Greek fleet but the sacrifice Menelaus throws at Will's feet will not bring them back.

"A life is made of moments. What moment are we in now?" Hannibal says with another flash of light.

Hannibal's eyes narrow ever so slightly, and Jack recognizes the anticipatory tic for what it is. His finger trembles upon the trigger, resolve dissipating like steam. His mouth goes dry as he looks at Hannibal's hands now drawn into fists. He realizes Hannibal has been signaling Will to do…what?

"What's it going to be, Will?" Jack says. "You going to shoot me? Or him?"

He turns from Hannibal in anticipation of the splatter he hopes will erupt when the bullet, his or Will's, enters Hannibal's skull.

Hannibal wants forgiveness yes, but he wants a real friendship. He already knows you can mimic him. I think he's hoping the real Will argues and fights with him. Stands up to him but lies down with him, too.

Pachelbel's Canon soars through his skull. Fate does not knock for Hannibal. He accepts it only if he cannot pound it into submission.

Will sees the next few seconds in perfect clarity if he does not shoot. Hannibal lunges forward knocking Jack's arm and the PPK he holds heavenward as the bullet discharges. He sees his bullet leave its chamber. He sees Jack stagger with the impact of his Berretta's bullet striking his exposed chest. Images of exploding plaster falling from the ceiling flash before Will's eyes. A kaleidoscope of color rains down upon their heads as stray bullets strake across the room, leaving a trail of ruined frescoes and flesh in their wake. He feels the crush of ivy beneath his feet, blinks away the flakes of falling paint hearing Achilles' tender verses.

Go then, Patroclus! Court fair virtue's charms. Return from Troy's famed fields victorious to rest in Achilles' arms.

Will almost laughs out loud. This is not a binary choice. He removes Pazzi's Berretta from his pocket.

The clatter of metal issues sharply as Will sends Pazzi's Berretta across the floor. It sails beneath Jack's swiveling head and Will springs from behind his panel in the opposite direction heels hitting the floor soundlessly as he advances on Jack.

Hannibal watches as Will bounds barefoot across the room, body twisting wielding his weapon in both hands like a sword released from its sheath. Will could have made his shot from where he was. Which means Will intends a different shot, from a different angle…

One thousand two…

"Will!" Jack barks.

Jack's head turns, vision caught between Will and Hannibal. The single second is costly, and Jack feels the consequence of his mistake immediately as thunder booms with gunfire, his hands explode with heat as the PPK is ripped from his bleeding fingers with indescribable velocity.

Atta boy, Will…

Patroclus has managed to dodge the bitter cup and pass it yet again. Point and counter point. Their eyes meet and the symphony swells unfinished, the ink still wet. Teeth bared and the sizzle of gunfire in his nose, Achilles leaps forward as the bewildered Menelaus' mouth drops in surprise.

Jack does not have time to think, only react. Hannibal's hands are already closing on his throat and Jack's arms come up, nerves screaming pain clear to his shoulders as his bloody fingers claw at Hannibal's sleeves.

Will has thrown Jack into the hell of Hannibal's kitchen once more. Prepared to die a moment ago, Jack's survival instinct kicks in like a stubborn mule. He manages to bring an elbow down in a sharp jab catching Hannibal in the throat.

Hannibal grunts in pain, the blow well placed between clavicles, but he maintains his balance. Jack, like Will, expects right handed punches from a right handed adversary. This is not new territory for Jack and neither is it for Hannibal. Jack had nearly overpowered him before and Hannibal's throat throbs with the memory.

A decisive assault is required. Hannibal had decked Will in the grove without the cushion of Lidocaine, the full force withheld by injury and the restraint of affection. Jack will not be so fortunate. An exultant smile peels lips from teeth as Hannibal's left fist finds Jack's solar plexus.

Jack winces, gasps and stumbles a few feet away but Hannibal is on him again. Jack turns his head this time thrusting into Hannibal's mid-section with everything he's got. The two of them smash into a cluster of panels sending mannequins toppling to the floor, the wobbly panels skidding along with them.

Amidst the sprawl of scattered tarps, panels, and mannequins Jack attempts to steady his swaying body despite the dizziness. He swings his arm through the air intent on knocking Hannibal in the head. His arm arcs but Hannibal is quicker. Bones bend in ways they aren't supposed to and Jack groans with the tearing of shoulder muscle.

Hannibal sends Jack careening across the room, feet tripping over the clutter scattered about, the smooth soles of his shoes slipping through the muck on the floor. Jack shakes the sticky tarp from his feet and Hannibal shoves him again, this time with enough force to send him stumbling face first into Vasari's painted walls.

Jack is vaguely aware of Will crouching in shadow as he crashes into the wall by the double doors. Will must have a reason for letting them fight it out but Jack does not have time to remunerate. His nose crunches against the cool plaster and his feet seek traction in the slick of blood that coats the shiny floor. He shifts around to see Hannibal approaching like a speeding projectile. He bolts from the wall grabbing an upright panel and flinging it behind him.

Hannibal dodges the rolling teetering panel and manages to catch the bottom of Jack's jacket. Jack twists, kicking at Hannibal's shins to get away.

Jack's angry acrobatics wound and Hannibal is sure he will feel the full effect of the blows eventually. But not before Jack feels the full effect of Hannibal's wrath.

The walkie talkie sputters from beneath the table and Will tears his eyes from the fight to focus on the Italian spilling from the speaker. He gathers enough that security has become concerned about the lack of contact from the *Polizia* and FBI wandering around. There is also the matter of the senior custodian who has not checked in since before his dinner break.

Before someone like another custodian wanders into this wing of the palazzo from the depths of the palazzo sealed behind the third set of doors, Will pulls the body of the *Signora* all the way into Lorenzo's room and closes the doors to the room of Leo X where the *Signora* had been working. He glances at Jack and Hannibal slamming each other around and decides he should shut the doors on the other access points. Visions of Abigail swim before his eyes as he drops a tarp over the pool of discord on the floor before the flashes of a rain soaked body bag lying next to him in the ambulance can fully materialize.

Will runs through the double doors into Cosimo the Elder's room to shut the doors Jack left open. He shuts all the doors to Cosimo the Elder's room and ties the door knobs together, sealing them off from the *Sala dei Cinquecento.* It won't hold the doors for long, but every second will count when security finally figures out what is going on.

"We seem to have reached an impasse in our friendship, Jack."

Hannibal grabs the huffing Jack by the lapels and slams him again into the wall. Jack's arms come up flailing even as he slides down the wall taking Hannibal with him. Blood streams from his fingers but Jack doesn't have time to investigate his injuries.

"Clarity will do that…"

Hannibal's hands grip Jack's biceps holding them abreast and it takes all Jack's strength to keep his arms from being pinned to the wall. Jack clubs at Hannibal alternately with his fists, striking head and shoulders while craning his neck to locate Will. Hannibal ducks his head, protecting eyes from the relentless assault.

Hannibal doesn't know where Will is, but neither does Jack. Will keeps dancing out of his line of vision presumably to keep Jack guessing. Jack's punches grow weaker, blood seeps from his fists and Hannibal lets rip with a vicious right, his knuckles skim across Jack's jaw, smashing into lips and teeth.

Jack swings a stained fist, misses and groans with grind of Hannibal's knee into his gut. Jack swings again, landing a solid hook to Hannibal's chin.

Hannibal's head reverberates from the bare knuckled punch. It will be Jack's last. Hannibal's fist delivers a crumpling blow to Jack's stomach. He shakes his head as he watches Jack fall to his knees. Uncle Jack has put up a valiant fight and a seasoned warrior deserves to go out fighting. Will has granted Jack an honorable death. He reaches into his pocket and withdraws the seven inch stiletto with the pearl hilt, a companion to the blade he gave to Will.

Floor meets knees abruptly and the ensuing pain is sharp as Jack's head also meets the slippery floor. Jack is vaguely aware of Hannibal dragging him away from the wall toward the tables. He twists in Hannibal's grasp, the room a blur of scarlet and shadows. He hears the dull click of a switchblade as Hannibal's fingers scrape up a handful of hair he obviously had let grow too long. Jack digs his fingers into Hannibal's wrist in a desperate effort to free himself but his fingers are too slick to keep a grip. He's not even certain all of his fingers are there.

Hannibal yanks Jack’s head back knife hovering over his throat. The scarring left from their last encounter shimmers pale along the smooth glistening brown skin and Hannibal pauses, thoughts of taking his blade across Abigail’s throat while Will had tearfully pleaded with him burst into his consciousness.

Don’t…d…don’t…no…n…no…

Abigail, come to me.

No…no….no

Will’s broken voice echoes from the recesses of his memory palace. Hannibal had reveled in Will’s pain, the desire to inflict upon Will a wound as savage and cruel as his betrayal had cut into him had been overpowering. His rage had left him helpless to stop the cruelty once begun. It is not rage that guides his hand in this moment, but the heady taste of conquest he shares with Will the way he has always wanted.

“Fate knocks, Jack. Full circle. A dangerous thing to reopen a wound.” Hannibal’s chest heaves, every breath victorious.

“Hannibal!” Will’s voice cracks sharply from nearby.

He lifts his head, eyes searching for the power that grants Jack a sliver a space between blade and flesh. He finds the slender form at the table close by. Will drops cords of rope from his shoulder and levels steely blue eyes at him.

“Will.” Hannibal purrs.

“Hannibal…” The voice coos this time.

His name drifts across skin like the rustle of satin sheets. Hannibal looks into the pale blue eyes and the battered face he would slather with kisses for the gift he holds in his hands. There is something of whiskey and firelight in the timbre of that voice, a voice Will usually reserves for intimate moments. He supposes gazing at each other over Jack’s painfully extended neck qualifies.

And yet, dissonance dances in the air and Hannibal’s face freezes with the vibrations of dissent.

Jack’s entire body tenses. He finds Will’s tone a bit disconcerting to say the least. Equally disconcerting is the realization that Will prefers his reality with Hannibal. Rather than pulling Will out of it; Jack has been pulled into it. Metal touches his skin, cold and foreboding.

Ribs aching and chest swollen with dread, Jack barely breathes lest the sharp ice pressed to his neck slips any deeper. The scuffling of Will’s feet draws his gaze from the scarlet streaked sleeve and with the sound come scraps of hope, meager as they are. Jack looks down his nose across the tarp covered floor at bared red tinted toes entering his line of vision. His gaze travels up the blood smeared uniform. He notes Will carries no weapon. Jack might find that encouraging but for the expression on Will’s face.

And the arm full of rope piled on the table.

“Will…”Jack says grinding his teeth.

“Not now, Jack.” An emphatic nick of the knife follows.

“A rather feisty rabbit, our Jack.”

The tone is crisply taut, sentiment stretched thin as the tightrope upon which the cub treads. Hannibal raises a brow at the corded rope.

Will sucks in a slow breath acknowledging the ferocity with which Hannibal holds his prey. It’s impossible not to miss the cautionary rumbling beneath mock pleasantry. Fingers seek ground in the pile of braided hemp as Patroclus considers his wrathful Achilles. Hannibal wants his reckoning with Jack but this reckoning is discordant and Will knows Hannibal’s finely tuned senses detect disharmony. The epic ego does not allow for the possibility that it is he who is off key.

The devil is not as black as he is painted.

Let’s find out…

Frosty white feathers gloss over Will’s shoulder and he tears his gaze from his Winged Daniel, pulls out the chair, looks into Hannibal’s face, ignoring for the moment Jack’s questioning brown eyes. He walks instead toward this cursed dark being whose hellish glare dissolves him with its charms, his reflection shimmers in black glass as Hannibal presses his lips together in a tight line.

“A jack…rabbit.” Will says.

“Who could have hopped away.”

Jack’s eyes grow wide with cannibalistic connotations.

What am I about to put in my mouth?

Rabbit.

He should have hopped faster.

Yes, he should have. But, fortunately for us, he did not.

Jack’s mind whirls, from his sea of memories a plethora of forgotten puns and dubious double entendres rises from its depths. Hands pulse with pain as they rest upon his red dappled trousers. He thinks Will might have shot off a finger but he is more unnerved by the rapport he witnesses with increasing anxiety. Jack trains his eyes on the hand and hilt hovering at his throat unbelieving that this is how it ends. He closes his eyes, braces himself for…

“There’s room at the table…for Menelaus.” Will’s voice.

“Relax a moment, Jack.” Hannibal’s voice.

Jack’s eyes pop open. Blood races through his veins, his heart thumping wildly as he kneels between two wolves. Two mad wolves.

“I hear dissonance in our melody. Are you…challenging me, Will?”

“Yes.” The blue eyes blink most endearingly. “I challenge your notion of *amor fati*. The dissonance you hear is the absence of contentment in the moment.”

“Mine or yours? You passed the cup to me.” Hannibal says eyes rolling from vexing cub to perplexed prey.

“I did.” The cub says with an equally provocative prick of his brow. “There are no dregs in the cup. I looked in the cup.”

Will’s eyes shine in the dim light, the spark of his imagination has ignited and Hannibal knows this spark when it flares in that pale blue sea.

“What did you see in the cup?” Hannibal asks.

Anger cools in the sparkling sea despite himself. The brazen blue eyes also flare with newfound awareness of their power over the hand eager to sever the vein throbbing along Jack’s throat. Hannibal would growl at the blue eyed cub’s audacity were it not so infuriatingly effective. He watches Will reach into his pocket and withdraw the *coq gaulois*.

“We had a conversation. Not long after we talked about murder and mercy. Do you remember *Stone and springing field wide one tenderness …?”*

Hannibal knows the verse, and he walks the halls of his memory palace searching for the room from where Will’s voice beckons. He finds that voice in his pleasantly wrecked bedroom in Baltimore.

“I do…*the unalterable hour smiles deathlessness*.”

Hannibal cites the line, memory stirs like pages torn from the worn volume he remembers sharing with Will as their bodies had sprawled naked and wet across his bed, bathed in sweat and firelight. Keeping up appearances, Will had kept his usual appointment; showing up for his session at Hannibal’s office a couple days after news of Mason’s *accident* had reached Jack. At Will’s prompting, Hannibal had agreed to invite Jack to that fateful dinner.

They had locked up the office, driven to Chandal Square. Talk of Mason’s disfigurement and Jack’s subsequent tongue lashing at Quantico had faded with the impromptu supper they had prepared, pecked at, and left unfinished on the table downstairs.

There had been no celebratory wrestling match this particular evening, the discussion at the office had been sobering and a somber mood had prevailed over their meal. Wine, several glasses of it, had soothed frayed nerves and had loosened muscles tightly held all afternoon beneath slacks and shirts. Wine, unlike whiskey, courts Will’s more amorous predilections and every crystal goblet of Bordeaux had added fuel to Will’s burgeoning desire.

Floating in no less than three of France’s finest vintages, they had ravaged each other and Hannibal’s stately bedroom in the process. Flushed and smearing Bordeaux spiced sweat all over the satin; Will had begun collecting rumpled sheets and blankets and had stumbled upon a volume of poetry somehow transported from nightstand to carpet.

What’s this?

A collection of poems. James Agee. An American poet, early twentieth century.

I’ve never read him. Will had dropped the satin, abruptly exchanging linen for illumination.

There is a tension between mind and spirit in his sonnets that remind me of your inner struggles.

I doubt there is much on the planet that doesn't remind you of me.

Will had flipped through the pages and had eased onto the mattress they had laid bare and streaked with DNA destined for the FBI. Hannibal had caressed the glistening skin, admiring the ripple of muscle along Will's back.

If I find a correlation between the majesty of creation and you, I hardly think conceit the proper response.

It's a fine line between hyperbole and sarcasm with you isn't it?

Hannibal had ignored the tartness of the bite. What had pleased him was that Will had bitten. Hannibal had motioned to the stereo remote miraculously sitting where he had left it on the night stand. Will had absently handed it to him, eyes returning to the book. With a couple of clicks he had queued up the desired selection. As the arrangement began to play, Hannibal had turned to his side and with head firmly and comfortably planted in the pile of pillows scrunched against the headboard, had felt a rapturous tide wash over him as Will's face had lit up, enthralled by the prose and Hannibal is certain, the proximity of their flesh

The composer Samuel Barber wrote an especially beautiful piece based on several verses from one of the poems. I believe I marked it…

Will had stretched out on his stomach beside him, body pressing against his as he had searched through the fragile pages. Whether an apology for his terse remark or a calculated manipulation, Will had read the passages from *Description of Elysium* rather than handing over the book as he usually did. A rarity between them, Hannibal had enjoyed listening to the cracked and throaty voice seemingly created for moments such as this.

…Sure on this night I weep for wonder wandering for alone, of shadows on the stars… Will had paused, *Elysium is a sort of special afterlife isn't it?*

Immortal plains that know no seasons, a place for the children of the gods and Zeus' chosen few. Like his daughter Helen; her mortal husband Menelaus joined her there. But, a cruel reward to bear alone if one's mortal beloved failed to earn Zeus' favor.

I suppose Achilles, son of a goddess was entitled to dwell there.

Will's imagination had been pricked earlier, his mind saturated, held captive by the scene Hannibal had presented to him at his office, the still unfinished version of *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus*.

He was and he brought his beloved and mortal friend Patroclus with him.

Where they fought battles together through eternity.

Will's toes had dug into Hannibal's calves. Hannibal had sunk incisors into the tempting shoulder and had tapped the open page with an insistent finger.

Hopefully, not each other. Perhaps if you finish, I might be persuaded to translate in Italian…

Hannibal contemplates the pale blue eyes spinning with associations. Will's gift is always sending him places and he has used the poetry to provide Hannibal a trail of thought so he can follow.

"Elysium." Hannibal nods, "Where *all is healed, all is health…"*

"And *high summer holds the earth*." Will finishes. "For Helen."

"But not for Menelaus." Hannibal says.

The pink tongue rolls out to moisten lips pursed together waiting for the cup to pass. The glazing of bruised flesh draws Hannibal's gaze right where Will wants; right where the poetry should have sent him, and does. Hannibal marvels at the manipulation but is not surprised at the skillfulness with which Will applies his sophist sleight of hand and using Hannibal's words to do it. He had no intention of drinking from the cup and has used their discussion earlier to get his way.

Will bites his lip noting the approval shining in the dark eyes, but not trusting it entirely. Hannibal sees his reasoning in the memory the verses summoned. That does not mean he agrees. He chooses his words with care, striking notes that should resonate with the perfect pitch.

"This cup is empty. I don't need to break it. I don't need… another sacrifice, do you?"

Will is not talking about only Jack, and Hannibal knows it. The resounding chords play between them. Will's voice hums painfully sweet deep in Hannibal's chest, once again plucking those dark thoughts from the darker places of his heart. The humid room buzzes with vibration that even Jack must, on some level sense, as past and present collide.

"No."

Hannibal thinks the piercing of Achilles' heel has never been more pleasurable. But, he does not capitulate without delivering a parting poke.

"When God refuses a prayer, is that virtuous?"

Will laughs softly, "I don't know, but he does it all the time."

Will's lips crinkle in that crooked way he has and the arrow sent by that smile erupts in golden confetti; the fierce flames of retribution quenched by clearer eyes than his. Jack may find that sometimes life is a more cruel punishment than death.

Uncle Jack will not be escaping the consequences of his conduct. The FBI has a word for Jack's incompetence and flagrant disregard of protocol. Ruined.

"Well, Jack…Will has won you a reprieve though I doubt you'll thank him for it. Or forgive him."

Jack stares uncomprehendingly at Will as the python like arm recoils from his throat taking the pearl handled stiletto with it. He strokes the scar along his throat as his mind stumbles through the peculiar patois of obscurity Will and Hannibal speak. The *coq gaulois* prompted something or he would be bleeding out on the floor right now.

"Why didn't you shoot me, Will?" Jack rubs at his throat.

"I did…shoot you Jack. You're lucky you still have all your fingers." Will says, tone cool.

Transitions are difficult and Will looks aside, retreats a little while mind and emotion adjust. Jack's presence constantly interferes with the frequency, an orchestration of carbon that disrupts the harmonious vibrations of a moment ago and Will requires time to recalibrate.

"That's not what I meant. And you know it." Jack snaps, gratitude quickly forgotten.

Will does know it. Jack is angry and sees only the rejection of his righteous prayer and it feels to him like a slap in the face. Will chooses his words with deliberation knowing Jack will chew on them later.

"You were willing to accept death as a cure. Well, you dropped your cure, Jack."

Will steps up close, presses the coin into Jack's waiting hand. He peers into Jack's face, nose to nose. He can almost taste the perspiration beading along Jack's upper lip.

Jack prickles at the abrupt intrusion. "The cure…was for you." Jack says looking down at his bloody palm.

"I'm not asking for a cure. And I deny you yours." Will says, stepping back. "If you want to join Bella, do it yourself. We twist in infernos of our own design. Blaming the devil doesn't make him responsible."

"We wanted to save lives, remember? You had every reason to catch him."

The words sound hollow even as he says them, an acrid taste twisting Jack's mouth with sourness he is far too familiar with. His hand clenches at Bella's cure and he slips it into his pocket; he lives to look upon it another day.

Jack's eyes are large and imploring and Will feels the tug of camaraderie they once shared deep in his chest. The lure of Jack's friendship is very much like one his fishing flies lying in his tackle box back in Wolf Trap. A carefully crafted thing, solid and real, but easily packed back into the tackle box.

"We agreed it was to save lives. But you wanted things. I wanted things. Lying is our currency, Jack, because it gets things done." Will says with finality he hopes Jack hears.

"At least you know who is pursuing whom." Hannibal says as Jack scowls.

He turns to Will knowing the reason for the crisply dealt words and steely stare. Uncle Jack strikes discordant notes and Will has moved beyond the tired tune that Jack plays. Will nods at the walkie talkie and frowns.

"Security?" Hannibal's eyes sweep over the device, silent for the moment.

"No search party yet, but absences have been noticed." Will's eyes shift to the camouflaged closet.

"Duly noted. I suspect we need to engage in a search party of our own."

"He didn't come to the palazzo with just the Walther." Will agrees.

"No…I imagine not." Hannibal says, nudging Jack toward the table. "What else did you bring, Jack?"

It's a gentle shove, but Jack knows the drill. Jack lurches forward, legs as shaky as a newborn colt he glances again at the mangled corpse across the room. Questions linger on his lips as he assumes the spread eagle stance for a frisk. Unsure of the proper etiquette Hannibal assigns to these delicate situations, he decides to adopt a wait and see attitude. Hannibal is clearly caught up in his own exquisite taste and cunning.

"Why don't you take off the jacket?" Will says to Jack then, turning to Hannibal, "I'll um…cut the rope."

The pearlescent handle gleams in Will's hand as he flicks the blade open. Jack recognizes the partner to the stiletto Hannibal had held to his jugular. His stomach churns as he rolls his eyes to the ceiling wondering who gifted whom and when. He almost groans aloud with the thought they went shopping together.

Jack relaxes a little as Hannibal helps him slip off the jacket with the attentiveness of a tailor. Hannibal begins patting him down, hands moving quickly from his sweat drenched shirt to trousers. Will rifles through the pockets of his jacket, placing each item on the table. The veneer of civility is jarringly at odds with the bloodlust he just experienced and Jack's mind whirls in this nightmare he has found himself.

To say that the relationship between Will and Hannibal is complicated would be a gross understatement and Jack would never make the mistake of reducing it to simple terms. He doubts a term even exists though he's sure Chilton will invent one. Whatever went down at the slaughter house further cemented this…*folie à deux*, whatever it is Hannibal and Will seem to have cultivated.

"Check for a utility knife in his right trouser pocket." Will meets the hard brown eyes.

Jack grunts with the petty betrayal thinking he has only removed his knife from his pocket in front of Will once. Jack had used it to cut his fishing line from an intractable hook that frigid and fateful afternoon out on the ice. He glares at Will while Hannibal reaches deep in his trousers and retrieves his knife.

Jack looks into the face he thought he knew. Will stares back with a quiet detachment very much like Hannibal's but all the more chilling because it is Will.

"You should have let me shoot him. Free us both."

Will frowns at the furrowed brow. Jack's capacity for denial apparently rivals his own, the proof evident every time Jack opens his mouth. Jack will eventually have to let go of the past. Transitions are difficult as Will knows.

"I am free, Jack. More free than I have ever been."

The blue eyes bore into his and as Will lifts his chin Jacks thinks he sees something of the monster Will unleashed on Pazzi. A glimpse of the transformation Will had desperately tried to tell him about, over and over again.

You know it's hard to shake off something that's already under your skin…

"Knowing who you are is very liberating, Jack."

Hannibal stares into the chrome hilt of Jack's utility knife as he polishes it with his thumb, waits for Will's face to float beside his before turning toward him and the air crackles again with a sigh of heat.

Jack grunts noncommittally. The compromising catalog of Hannibal's drawings in Impruneta fills Jack's head and image after image parades through his brain. Jack has joined the madness. They are not in the *Palazzo Vecchio* but somewhere between the Greek fleet and the walls of Troy.

He stares dully at his shoes while Achilles pats down his leg and Patroclus saws off sections of rope. He knows Menelaus was one of the Greek generals at Troy and a king, the king Paris stole Helen from but the myths of Menelaus and his ancient cohorts are nestled in his bookcase back in Baltimore. Jack bemoans his humanities deficient education. More than a passing acquaintance with Homer would go a long ways toward understanding how Hannibal and Will have twisted his *Iliad*.

"He'll have another gun. Socks." Will says dryly.

"You might have said so earlier."

Hannibal sets Jack's knife on the table, looks to the mouth set in its usual line, but the blue eyes sparkle playfully when Will glances up from the rope he cuts.

"Fortunately he didn't get a chance to show it to you earlier." Will says.

Jack lifts his right pant leg, saving Hannibal the trouble. Hannibal removes the weapon from the ankle holster, holds it up to Will.

"What's this?"

"Glock 27. Smaller than his PPK. Lighter, more plastic, less metal."

Jack glares at the two of them. He feels numb, like he is watching a bad dream suddenly take a horrible turn and become unimaginably worse. Jack tells himself he has awakened from nightmares far more disturbing than this, but from this there is no escape.

Hannibal hums as he releases the magazine from the Glock as easily as he had Ruggerio's service Berretta. Firearms do possess a certain charm. Hannibal's appreciation lies more with their utilitarian mechanisms though he admits Will wields his with enviable flair. He looks to Jack's hands and considers Jack will not be wielding anything for quite some time.

"Have a seat next to the *Signora*." Hannibal says preparing to provide first aid, a parting courtesy to an old friend for whom clarity has served only to expand the divide between them.

Jack's head swivels to the mannequin propped up in the chair; thoughts of the actual *Signora Pazzi* and the widow he has made of her erupt like a blemish. Jack is guided to his seat, Hannibal's hand at his back exchanged for the weight of Will's hand on his shoulder. Hannibal gathers his medical bag; Will gathers lengths of cut rope from the table and shoves the pile across the table toward Hannibal. They move in tandem, like a dance.

"Some beautiful drawings I found in Impruneta, Hannibal."

"Thank you, Jack."

“Formal training?”

Hannibal looks up from his medical bag, decides it doesn’t matter if Jack is patronizing him.

“I learned by emulating the styles of the great masters, as they took inspiration from those who came before them.”

Will’s eyes slide to Jack. The look on Jack’s face confirms Hannibal’s penchant for self-aggrandizing was duly noted. Jack’s flattery is a prelude. Will waits for the point surely intended to prick.

“It’s the source of inspiration for the subject matter that is going to get the attention once this goes public. You’ll be sharing the spotlight, Hannibal. But I guess that’s the outcome you want.”

“The FBI must be salivating at all the dirty laundry they’ll be tasked to sift through.” Hannibal says.

“Not just the FBI. You’ll make millionaires out of Freddie Lounds and her ilk.” Jack says.

“Murder Husbands, I believe is the term she touts.” Hannibal says.

“She’d better copyright it before Chilton does.” Will frowns.

“Sticks and stones.” Hannibal says, “Amateurs.”

“The FBI doesn’t throw sticks and stones. Every piece of evidence will be turned inside out.”

Will looks to Hannibal with mock seriousness. “We’ll be reduced to dinner party gossip among FBI elites.”

“And required reading for cadets.” Hannibal says, “Staged murder, sex, and cannibalism. An irresistible trifecta of abnormal pathologies.”

Hannibal grabs a length of rope preparing to swaddle Jack with it. Will retires to the window, reclines against the shutters and folds his arms across his chest.

“You don’t need to keep a watch on me, Will. I know when I’m outflanked.”

Jack is undeniably outflanked and he decides not to escalate the flanking. The sight of Pazzi and the *Signora* laid out on the floor are more than sobering reminders of what he is dealing with.

“Up to you, Will. I’ll take Jack at his word. I can tend to the triage.”

Hannibal places the rope back on the table, waits while Will considers. He is favored with a quick nod and Will pushes off from the shutters. Hannibal doesn’t move aside until Will takes the rope from his opened palm savoring the touch of warm flesh at his fingertips as Will swipes the coarse braid from his hand.

Will meets Jack’s accusing eyes with a dispassion he doesn’t need to manufacture. It’s not that he doesn’t empathize with Jack, because he does, more than he wants to. He feels strangely at peace with the situation and with himself. It’s an odd sensation and Will isn’t sure how he feels about *that.* How Hannibal feels is, by contrast, written all over his face. The creases around the dark hooded eyes and the tic of his lips are tantamount to a victory dance.

Jack watches Hannibal pull out one of the elegant chairs for himself and scoot up to sit close while Will wraps rope around his chest like he's rigging a boat to the dock, head down absorbed in his task. Jack reminds himself Will is accustomed to the rigors and tools of the sportsman. Jack is not going to get out of this chair by himself.

Thoughts wander in the quiet though the silence is no less acrimonious. Jack focuses on the beautifully carved antique he's being tied to. Jack might appreciate the sleek curve of the wood supporting his back a little more if the rope Will had looped around his chest were not so tight.

He watches the rain splatter on the window sills as Will tugs and pulls at his feet. The thunder and lightning have become intermittent and Jack thinks the room feels a few degrees cooler. Thankfully, Pazzi faces the other direction, away from the table. Jack thinks he must be getting old or jaded. He isn't particularly upset by his bloodied surroundings.

And blood is everywhere. Unless one's profession deals with the issue of bodily fluids, the average person has no idea just how much blood courses through their body. When someone says the room was painted in blood that is fairly accurate. The tarps on the floor resemble a leaky pool cover, puddles of deepest red spread the length of the table. Hannibal's overt reverence for the palazzo's heritage had compelled him to protect its priceless murals and the spatter on the curtained panels justifies his unrelenting fastidiousness.

Hannibal glances down at Will huddled on the floor to make sure he has not drifted off. He hasn't. The slender fingers pause in their work, eyes flicker up and Will acknowledges Hannibal's silent inquiry with a tilt of his chin. Satisfied, Hannibal turns his attentions back to Uncle Jack who seems content to remunerate on his situation while Hannibal examines his wounds. The bullet didn't strike Jack's fingers, but the force of physics ripping away the gun has shredded flesh clear to bone on the digits closest to the trigger. More scars for Jack.

Jack is likely unaware of Will's lapses, but Hannibal prefers to limit Jack's ammunition. Jack is a resourceful and adept adversary. His hands are as groomed as the rest of him. He keeps them well-manicured but this is superficial. Hannibal is familiar with the strength and the tenacity of Jack Crawford. Promises and platitudes of good behavior are easily cast aside in the face of opportunity.

As Will tugs and Hannibal unpacks, Jack observes. There seems to Jack a constant stream of communication between Will and Hannibal. Gone are the guarded glances Jack had witnessed from Will and Hannibal during previous encounters. The uncomfortable silences at the dinner table, the endless predatory circling around Tier's tableau at the Natural History Museum are not in evidence here. Neither is Will's signature avoidance of eye contact.

Your lure is the one thing he wants, despite everything he knows.

Metaphors are useful to a point and Jack wonders still what tipped Hannibal off if not Will's brief phone call. He doubts that Will revealed his own role in the deception and the means by which Hannibal deduced Will's duplicity remains a mystery. Chilton and Lounds had been pronounced dead. The universe he had created with Hannibal had been one of uncertainty, and Jack realizes now, not entirely a deception on Will's part or Hannibal's.

Hannibal's assault on Will while not fatal was nonetheless ruthless and clearly passionate. Will did not receive that wound in a fight, but an embrace.

Looking at the two of them now, in this room in this moment, Jack is beginning to have some idea why Will did not use his weapon that night. Still crouched on the floor tying off rope, Will maintains his aura of quiet reserve as he looks alternately from Jack to Hannibal. Jack receives cautiousness, but the expressive eyes no longer sweep over Hannibal in contrived detachment. The glances exchanged between them are frequent, meaningful…intimate.

"My courier delivered my message." Hannibal says tone curt so it slices through the momentary haze through which Jack stares blankly at him.

Jack's mind lurches with the unexpected switch of topic. He watches Hannibal unpack his medical bag while he mentally prepares for another round.

"What did you find in Fiesole?" Will's voice floats from behind the chair.

"I found what you expected me to find and acted on it." Jack says, "Du Maurier had already gone but uh…Freddie Lounds was there."

"Dead or alive?" Will asks.

"Alive. Barely. Du Maurier a.k.a. Francesca Dumont set the place on fire. Lounds was found nude and drugged. And all her hair had been cut off."

Will imagines the sight of a shorn Lounds and a seeming desperate Du Maurier had not been lost on Jack. He shoots a confirming glance at Hannibal and resumes tying his knots.

"Du Maurier doesn't know you were there. She'll be watching the news… to gloat." Will scoffs reaching for his phone. "She's going to be disappointed."

Jack looks to the impassive face hovering over his hands. He expects callousness from Hannibal; he sent Lounds there. It's a little unnerving to see the same dismissiveness from Will. It is with significant irritation that Jack remembers Lounds said she found Hannibal with Clayton at Clayton's office after Pazzi had sent her there. The time line in Jack's head suggests Clayton had stopped at his office before joining Will at the hospital. And neither Will nor Clayton had informed him of Hannibal's visit. Will did not send Lounds, but he obviously has no qualm with Hannibal over it.

The devil is in the details and Jack suspects the devil had some help. Jack wonders how much of the design Will collaborated on. Jack thinks Clayton a contributor as well.

"Lounds told me where she had been before she got to the Fiore Estate." Jack pauses watching Will close his eyes briefly and huff out a sigh. "Told me you advised her to bring me along."

"A shame she didn't. You could have had Bedelia." Hannibal says.

"You knew Lounds wouldn't contact me. She would protect her story." Jack says, surprised Hannibal refers to Du Maurier so casually.

"Miss Lounds' choice to eschew safety for the sake of her passion. If Miss Lounds had not survived, you would not have connected Bedelia to Ms. Dumont for quite some time had I not directed you there."

"You don't expect a thank you, do you?" Jack says.

"Courtesy is always appreciated, but in this instance not required." Hannibal says.

Miss Lounds was a problem in need of resolution and informing Jack was necessary so that Du Maurier's resolution would not reach its full efficacy. There is also the pleasure of knowing that Lounds is once again back in the mix and she will invariably cross their path to vex them again.

"Miss Lounds has a talent for survival. Admirable."

"Unbelievable." Will says wryly. "I doubt Du Maurier will be thinking the same thing. How could she be so careless?"

"There was an unintended casualty in your little game." Jack pipes up.

"Who?"

"Fiore's daughter."

Lydia… Will remembers Daniel complaining about the dysfunctional parents and their enabling of the very behaviors in their daughter they wanted fixed.

"Must have wandered down to talk to her shrink."

Jack watches Will's face expecting the eyes to drop or look away but they don't.

"That's how Miss Lounds escaped." Hannibal says. "The unknown variable."

Jack nods. "Lounds doesn't remember getting out of the house. She doesn't remember the daughter being there."

"Lounds didn't crawl outside; the daughter dragged her out and went back inside for her psychiatrist, Dumont." Will says, wondering how long before Lounds is screaming for her laptop from her hospital bed.

"A remarkable confluence of circumstances." Hannibal says.

"Fate." Will says, catching the dark gaze and flashing one of his own.

He sees the entire horrendous scene play out in his mind. Lydia Fiore was a completely random element. Du Maurier had not been careless as much as unlucky and Will wonders again at the seeming incestuous relationship between Hannibal and Fate.

"She was Doctor Clayton's patient, too. Did you think I wouldn't find out?" Jack snaps and reels in his bite at blue ice and razor thin mouth.

"Daniel didn't know." Will says perhaps too emphatically. "The sessions were legitimate, his canine therapy. Du Maurier used him to get to me."

"When did you find out?" Jack says.

"Doesn't matter."

Jack's tone borders on badgering and Will does not appreciate it. He finishes the last knot, picks up the phone he has scarcely looked at, and decides he may as well negotiate on Daniel's behalf since Jack is at a disadvantage Will intends to exploit with relish.

He pulls up a chair and sets down the phone on the table. He can check the news in a moment. Nothing has changed. Du Maurier is still toast…or pork tenderloin…or shredded lamb crepes. Whatever.

“If Clayton is guilty of anything…” Jack starts but Will cuts him off.

“The only thing he’s guilty of is trying to help. I told him to cut a deal with you.”

“Well, I can’t speak to that until all this blows up in my face, Will.”

Hannibal looks to Will on the other side of a table too small to accommodate the personalities seated at it. When undiluted by distracting dribbles of retribution and indecision, Will’s sense of loyalty is pure, a defining quality Hannibal had noticed immediately and had nurtured to his advantage. The result sits across from him gazing rather crossly at Jack.

It’s expected that the cub would seek to protect his little mouse and Jack’s obstructionist note strikes another wrong chord. What is to be done about that?

“Did you know that vocal chords can be cut without risking exsanguination?” Hannibal says knowing there is no need to toss even a miniscule glance at his open medical bag.

“I did not know that. Did you know that, Jack?” Will says.

He rises from the chair, feigning the requisite gravitas Hannibal’s remark invites just in case he’s not pulling Jack’s leg.

Jack’s eyes shift from one side of the table to the other unsure how to respond, but decidedly assured he does not want a demonstration.

“I suppose Doctor Clayton was compromised, confused.” Jack says, deciding quickly that further prevaricating is probably imprudent.

“And under my diabolical influence.” Will says. “Leave him alone Jack, because that’s what I’m going to do. I would appreciate it if he got some semblance of his life back.”

“Doctor Clayton’s participation could not be helped. You certainly availed yourself of it.” Hannibal says unscrewing the cap of the antiseptic.

Jack doesn’t appreciate the false equivalency but nods. Implicit threats notwithstanding, he figures Clayton is no less culpable than himself, his involvement more nuanced than Jack perhaps thought. He’s surprised Clayton has lasted this long.

“I’ll make it as sweet as I can, Will, but I may not have a lot of clout after all this.”

Hannibal reaches for the gauze, the dark eyes flick to Will and the expression on Hannibal’s face sends Jack squirming inside.

Shades of Baltimore and Hannibal’s dining room burst into Will’s consciousness. His eyes are drawn to the clean white strip Hannibal cuts from the roll and his mind drifts with the gauze Hannibal dabs on Jack’s fingers, eyes following movement, and he retreats to a different moment as ghosts of their shared memory palace shimmer above the stained and cluttered table he stands beside in this moment.

Hannibal notes the slackened jaw as Will's right hand hangs suspended in the air fingers splayed wide, experience and empathy colliding right before his eyes. Will looks into Hannibal's face, lips parted in silent acknowledgment. Hannibal's chest cannot help but burn with Will's wonderful drops of fire.

"Lounds surprised you at Clayton's office. Why not uh…" Jack searches for the right word, decides he doesn't care, "neutralize Lounds yourself?"

Hannibal shifts in his seat, corrects the tic of pique at his mouth that the oblivious Jack has elicited.

"I would think that obvious. I did not wish to involve Doctor Clayton or unduly upset him. He was on his way to see Will. And I had other matters to attend to. I knew Bedelia would *neutralize* the threat out of self-interest."

"Speaking of Bedelia, what have you found, Will?" Hannibal says, voice light and betraying nothing of the pleasant heat Will has sent sizzling through sinew and bone.

Startled from his reverie of blood and bandages, Will blinks himself back into the moment. He thinks he's been doing that more than usual this evening.

"I'm still reading, but it looks like law enforcement is at Defcon 4." Will says.

"Another pop culture reference, Will?"

"It's from a famous movie…"

"I'm sure it is. What is the scale?"

"Um…5."

Hannibal nods once, gives the gauze a corrective tug. "Meaning we're not surrounded by a S.W.A.T team or the National Guard."

"Right. That…would be Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Will thinks surely Hannibal has seen that.

"Hmmmm?"

"You're going after Du Maurier." Jack says tersely.

"Yes."

"Good luck with that. She's probably already on her way to the airport." Jack says.

Will ambles over and angles his phone so Hannibal can read the headlines and, if he is perfectly honest with himself, so his sleeve can brush against his. Flesh tingles deliciously despite the layers of fabric between them and Hannibal lifts his eyes to the sullen Jack the same time as Will.

"Jack…you know that's not true. Bedelia won't be caught by the FBI." Hannibal says unperturbed. "Bedelia can become caught up in her own exquisite taste and cunning. That is how she'll be caught."

The look Jack shoots to Will is, as they say, priceless. Will immediately dodges and looks down at his phone. A chord has been struck however. Hannibal watches the notes play across the delicate features as the bottom lip disappears and the jaw clenches to suppress the snicker Hannibal suspects nearly snuck out.

Jack takes note of the crease of confidence carved along Hannibal's cheeks. He rolls the conversation he's hearing around his head. He feels like… an amateur.

"I'm obviously missing something. You set me up like a domino in a long line of dominoes." Jack says.

"Yes. I sent you there so the FBI could do what I cannot." Hannibal says.

"Which is?"

"Ensure that the public is included in the hunt. Bedelia is now effectively grounded and will have to seek other means to flee Florence. She will regroup in the only residence she has left."

"The FBI has no jurisdiction here. You would need Interpol's cooperation to put out an A.P.B." Will says, shoving the phone aside. "And keeping Du Maurier from leaving Florence as Lounds would require that."

Jack turns to Will and the brows arch slightly but Will's face is as smoothly bereft of emotion as Hannibal's. More meaningful glances ensue and Jack sighs. If he provides information he is abetting two dangerous psychopaths and is, by definition complicit in whatever they decide to do with the wine swilling arsonist. The manipulative wine swilling arsonist he let slip through his fingers once already.

So you managed to avoid prosecution. I gave you every opportunity to tell the truth, but you ran.

How do you think the FBI could have protected me? You couldn't protect Will Graham. You still can't.

"Yes. Du Maurier will never make it past the gate. Lounds' passport is useless." Jack says turning to Hannibal, "But it doesn't matter, the end result would have been the same whether Lounds had survived or not."

Jack watches Hannibal's chest swell with insufferable pride in his accomplishment; he is practically sprouting feathers. Even worse is watching a slow smile crawl helplessly across Will's face.

"You're out of your element, Jack." Hannibal says, "If Du Maurier's ruse had not been compromised you still would have known. In order to catch her, protocol demands cooperation with local authorities and government as Will said."

"Unless she was a threat to national security, you would need the Italian equivalent of the US State Department to coordinate a country wide covert operation and she doesn't qualify. Standard operating procedures dictate alerting the public. Once you requested an A.P.B. on Lounds, it was out of your hands."

"To go after her alone with limited FBI resources was not an option either, was it Jack?" Hannibal says.

The taste of defeat wrings bitterly from Jack's mouth and Will guesses that's as much of an answer as Jack is going to give. The FBI has done its job which explains the insane news coverage he is reading. After tonight, his impending notoriety is certain as the sunrise. But, so is Du Maurier's.

"All the layers of bureaucracy ensured you couldn't keep the details of the investigations at the Fiore Estate and the slaughter house separate or from the press." Will says.

Jack looks aside; agitation biting at his neck as the sense that this was an orchestrated screw up blossoms into a hideous flower. The Italian press like its stateside counterpart does not rely upon official statements for its coverage. Fact and rumor rapidly spread to social media. Floating a false narrative at home is difficult, floating one on short notice in a foreign country is impossible. Hannibal and Will's assessment of his predicament is dead on.

"I don't suppose you want to leave me her address?"

"No. We don't want anyone locating her precipitately." Hannibal says.

Du Maurier shudders as she steps out of the Jacuzzi. She moves from the patio through the opened doors, the sweet smell of the summer rain lingers in her wake. And while the rain has stopped imparting its lovely freshness, the recent downpour has done little to assuage the humidity that assails every Tuscan night. The villa is rather untidy at the moment and the air conditioning runs full blast, but Du Maurier likes the smell as she wraps the soft burgundy towel more tightly around her damp body. She very much likes the fact that none of this is her concern. The owner of this residence does not exist.

Du Maurier slips on her favorite robe, eyes on the large screen mounted on the wall. Updates on the slaughter house fire have been continuous and the updates are more informed as witnesses and law enforcement have given interviews about the investigation. News about the Fiore Estate fire has understandably been overshadowed by the debacle.

She listens closely; confirmation that her ruse was successful is required before she purchases her ticket though she had felt a jolt of excitement after she had arranged for the taxi. The hour she arrives at the airport does not matter, or which airport really. She only needs Lounds' passport to secure a flight to any international airport. After that, she will present a different passport after a trip to a salon. She thinks perhaps Berlin or Copenhagen would be desirable destinations this time of year.

She had driven through a horrendous thunderstorm on her way to Siena. The rain had stopped by the time she had arrived and Du Maurier had sought solace in her Jacuzzi. The pulsing of jets had soothed her nerves and her crowded mind. She wonders how long it will take to adapt once she is finally removed from the source of maladjusted behaviors it will likely take years to correct. She lifts her glass musing she may require therapy and then…laughs aloud.

Not a chance in hell.

She had forgone the bottle of Fiore Estate Sauvignon Blanc on the counter and had opened a bottle of Clos d'Ambonnay champagne. This particular bottle had sold for two grand and Du Maurier had slipped into her Jacuzzi reveling in the realization that she could afford to fill it with champagne.

While sniffing the aromas of berries and licorice from the cork, the news coverage is interrupted by a breaking news bulletin. Du Maurier leans forward enrapt, wine glass suspended as the Special FBI Agent in charge of the crime scene at the slaughter house explains how important it is not to engage the two suspects wanted for the Paolini murders and the carnage they keep dragging before the cameras at the Paolini slaughter house. Photos of Hannibal and Graham flash onto the screen and Du Maurier catches her breath.

An Inspector Santo from Interpol stands next to the FBI agent. Du Maurier listens as he expresses his support and confirms continuing cooperation with the FBI but he refuses to comment on possible reasons for the FBI consultant's presence. Du Maurier is not surprised at this. The FBI will wait while they decide how to salvage their reputation and spin Graham's involvement to their advantage. And perhaps not only Graham.

One Jack Crawford is conspicuously absent.

She glances at the bag of shorn spirals on the kitchen counter, arranged in an elegantly tied loose braid. The precaution remains. Circumstances dictate she may have to dispense with Lounds' disguise in an instant however; events thus far portend a favorable outcome.

She also has time for a detour to Provence before flying into Zurich.

She sips at her champagne, shifting her gaze from the screen to the Bellagio Luggage strewn about the room. The luggage is for Hannibal. He is welcome to it if he manages to avoid the FBI and make his way here. She will be gone. She has both codes and he does not. He has no idea where she is at the moment and does not care. If he did, she would never have left Impruneta alive.

He is preoccupied with his obsession.

His renewed courtship of Graham had begun with a modest meal. There had been invitations sent courtesy the Paolini twins, and appetizers were quick to follow with the irate relatives. Regrettably, there had only been time to butcher not consume. The main course had been beautifully laid out at his villa in Impruneta. An obviously important phase of the courtship considering the menu and décor. She had interrupted, but Hannibal had improvised and took Graham on another date to Boboli. Graham had apparently been pleased, as least intrigued enough to accept yet another date at the slaughter house.

Du Maurier bites her tongue. It would appear that at least Graham isn't easy. He's certainly making Hannibal work for it. Perhaps the third date was the charm. Graham seems rather old fashioned that way. She wonders again how a being as visually stunning as he has only to open his exquisite mouth to turn attraction to repulsion. She muses Hannibal had made similar reference to Graham's contradictory nature though she suspects Hannibal finds nothing at all contradictory about Graham's mouth or what comes out of it.

She smiles into her glass thinking how prescient her decision to steal the codes had been. Without Hannibal's code, she would not be able to access their account for at least a year from the date of dear departed *Monsieur Labrenz's* demise. She thinks it not out of the realm of possibility that poor *Monsieur Labrenz* may actually end up dead.

The FBI will be relentless. In Baltimore, Hannibal had been fortunate that the FBI had been working outside its jurisdiction, its operatives, namely Crawford and Graham, had acted outside the purview of the tarnished institution, its reputation in Baltimore already much maligned by these same operatives.

Hannibal's hubris has finally caught up to him. If he and Graham are not shot or apprehended by the FBI, they will require a place to lick their wounds. She doubts they will lick each other at Clayton's residence. Clayton must be under FBI surveillance by now. She assumes Clayton is still alive or she would be hearing about it.

She pours out a handful of moisturizer and begins to slather up her legs, eyes still focused on the suspended screen. Thoughts compulsively return to Hannibal and Graham and Clayton, a compulsion she rues will ever remain. The date at the slaughter house may have finally shattered Graham's resistance. In that case, Hannibal may believe he has won carte blanche to do as he pleases and force Graham to choose between someone he loves and Hannibal.

And Graham, for all his flaws, appears to be very fond of Doctor Daniel Clayton.

Clayton may prove to be the most valuable piece on the board. Hannibal's possessiveness of Graham will compel him to remove this last obstacle from what appears to be a blissful blood drenched honeymoon with his beloved. Du Maurier is sure that Hannibal will find a way to remove the doomed Clayton from the board.

She tips her glass at the tv before sipping the sparkling licorice laced indulgence. Du Maurier is not the checkmate Hannibal desires, Clayton is. Graham was never on the board. He is the prize. In Hannibal's besotted eyes…

Champagne, especially champagne as carefully crafted and aged as Clos d'Ambonnay slips down one's throat like a cool bubbly fountain, a delight like no other, unsurpassed in flavor and sensation. It is not, however, quite as delightful coming back up the esophagus in a tepid acrid stream.

Du Maurier spews the warm spittle through her lips, coughs as it spurts from her nose. She stares stunned and horrified at her own picture looming to the right of the dark haired woman spouting rapid fire Italian. She listens to the vomit inducing news that an American *journalist* following the Paolini murders survived the suspicious fire at the Fiore Wine Estate and a full recovery is expected. The motivation behind the arson is unknown, but authorities speculate that either the journalist or the unnamed casualty or both were intended to provide aliases for the suspect.

The mute button ends the incessant chatter but Du Maurier's nausea is just beginning. The pleasant taste of raspberry and anise dissolves turning to dust as she stares at the TV. She swallows several times forcing the champagne to stay where it is. She grasps the edge of the coffee table until her fingers ache and fingernails have dented wood.

The room whirls around her and she draws shaky legs beneath her on the sofa. She does not know how many minutes have passed by the time she becomes aware of the news anchor again. The impulse to send her champagne flying across the room at the screen is quickly stifled.

Du Maurier relaxes, somewhat. She turns up the sound, takes a generous gulp and closes her eyes sinking into the sofa, cushioning the shock waves assaulting her wearied limbs. The FBI is on to her. If she attempts to board a plane as Lounds or anyone else tonight, she will surely be surrounded by airport security. There will be road blocks and lines of traffic.

When you have finished cleaning up…your mess, Hannibal, you are welcome to my home in Siena.

Thank you. Most considerate of you. You'll be returning to Fiesole?

Hannibal couldn't have had anything to do with this, could he? He had obviously been at the slaughter house while she had been entertaining Lounds. As she glances again at the TV she thinks Hannibal may not be aware of these developments though Du Maurier finds that unlikely. Wherever he is, Hannibal is also tracking the news. The fact remains that Hannibal will still likely seek refuge here in Siena. The only difference is that Du Maurier will still be here when he gets here.

Du Maurier taps her glass; the clink of the thickly lacquered nails upon the crystal helps her think. She glances at her phone, considers a call or a text but decides against it. She looks to the copper braid on the counter. Hannibal will not be pleased that the exit strategy he might have taken advantage of is no longer an option.

But, Hannibal believes the status quo remains. He will expect her to cooperate to their mutual advantage again. She does not relish the idea of a sleep over with Hannibal and Graham. And Graham will surely be tagging along. No doubt Hannibal imagines the three of them running away together and the thought causes her fingers to coil tightly around the stem of her glass until memory and the scar on her finger reminds her that the glasses are rather fragile.

Du Maurier sourly wonders how many times she can suffer hearing the whine of "Will" before dropping Hannibal with half a dozen bullets. Jest becomes quest as the thought snaps in her head like fresh linen over a bed and settles there. As usual Graham remains unpredictable. She concedes she does not know what has transpired between them since leaving the wreckage they wrought upon the slaughter house. At Hannibal's villa, Graham had kept his intentions close while keeping Hannibal closer still. Then again, Graham does not have to do much except breathe to send Hannibal all aflutter.

He had allowed Hannibal to talk him down after her assault on him in Impruneta; granted his options had been limited. Du Maurier recalls the brief conversation between Graham and Hannibal before Graham had fallen face first onto the table.

Hannibal. The weapon can discharge if…

I know… Will, this…is not the reckoning you want. Will…look at me.

I…I..didn't finish…my dessert…

Nor did I. Remember that.

It would appear that Graham has been subjected to a form of conditioning, whether aware of it or not. That would be a logical extension of Hannibal's preference to employ behaviorism excessively. She finds herself falling prey to it every once in a while.

The traumatized are unpredictable because they know they can survive. Will Graham is nothing but traumatized. She may yet find salvation and survival in Will Graham.

Will scratches at his raw neck as he paces alongside the cluttered table where Hannibal attends to Jack's injured fingers. He is uncomfortable but content in his discomfort. His gaze wanders over the persistent hallucination of grass at his feet, the slender green vines and shoots of pale flowers that explode like stars over the walls and ceiling, dotting the paintings and murals with splashes of softest pink. His thoughts wander with his gaze and as Will's eyes drift to Jack he imagines Jack's thoughts resemble a pinball machine gone haywire. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and tries to ignore the swarm of angry ants crawling around his neck.

Jack sits numbly holding his torn fingers straight as he can while Hannibal deftly smothers each one in antiseptic. Jack hopes to gather as much information as he can before security bursts in or he succumbs to one of the syringes he sees in Hannibal's medical bag. Even without being drugged, he feels strange, the surreal quality of sitting around the table with Hannibal and Will like this is mind blowing. The opportunistic Chilton will be eternally jealous, eating his own heart out when he finds out and breaking down Jack's door for a chance to help in any way he can, gratis of course...

"Will…you deliberately lied to me about the hearts in the tableaux." Jack says, the sense that he has been transported to an asylum pervasive.

"Which hearts?" Will says.

Jack frowns. "All of them. You lied to my face and you perpetuated the lies."

"And the hearts." Will reminds him.

Jack is careful to keep his accusatory tone to a minimum. Not because he is concerned about offending Will, he is concerned about offending Hannibal. Receiving medical care from Hannibal after receiving a beating and a close encounter with a stiletto strikes Jack as contradictory if not horrendously hypocritical though he knows Hannibal does not see it as such. Withholding medical attention from the enemy recently granted amnesty would be rude.

Hannibal's universe spins on an entirely different axis. Manners are next to godliness and rudeness is an egregious sin punishable by death. Murder is meted out with divine detachment. The offender becomes dinner.

In Hannibal's universe, presenting his new neighbor with a gourmet pot roast of dubious origin is completely within the bounds of proper etiquette. He would murder this same neighbor for some perceived slight and take the time to feed the neighbor's orphaned cat on his way out. If the neighbor had mistreated his cat, Hannibal might even find poetic justice in feeding the neighbor to the cat. At the very least, his funny bone would be tickled pink at the inversion of the established food chain. This side of Hannibal Jack knows.

The rolodex on his kitchen counter had not been placed near the phone but the cutlery, an alphabetical listing of every rude person Hannibal had encountered in Baltimore. It was not incidental that his rolodex sat next to the recipe box. Jack isn't sure which had been more disturbing; the explanation for the odd pairings of business cards clipped to recipes or the pained grin on Will's face as he had informed Jack of the reason for the paper clips.

To insult Will is to insult Hannibal. It is clear to Jack, in his limited capacity as Director of Behavioral Sciences, that Hannibal considers Will an extension of self. He is not sure if the reverse is true. Hannibal is the narcissist and Jack is not sure what Will is. Jack thinks Will is not sure what he is at any given moment and for this reason, he remains in Hannibal's irresistibly strong orbit.

And so, considering his current predicament and despite his stay of execution, Jack thinks it wise to watch his manners.

"Lies are currency, remember?" Will says pacing beside the chair as he watches Jack watching Hannibal.

“That was brilliant misdirection on your part. Completely convincing. You’ve never lied to me before, Will.”

Will hears in Jack’s mild rebuke the paternal pandering he has heard before. Still using the same old play book. Well…Will brought a new one.

“To characterize my brilliant misdirection as lies is inaccurate.”

“A fine line. Splitting hairs just like Hannibal.”

“Or you. When necessary. Sins of omission and embellishment. Not the same thing. A means to an end you were aware of and endorsed with your silence.”

Jack concedes he deserves that one. “Pretty slick letting my team process all that bullshit you handed out.”

Will stops to stand at Hannibal’s side like a sentry, arms crossed over his chest but the barrel of the Berretta clearly visible in his front pocket.

“If it smelled that bad you wouldn’t have gulped it down, Jack. You were hungry, so I fed you. There was substance in every meal. I just threw in some extra seasoning.”

“Like one of Hannibal’s recipes. Presentation and seasoning concealed the true ingredients.”

Jack winces with the sting of the antiseptic Hannibal dribbles over his hands. Hannibal pats the excess dry, his touch and perverse smile reserved and quick. Jack swears the dribble deliberate.

“I knew what I was eating.” Will says. “So did you.”

“But you developed a taste for it.”

“Taste and smell are the oldest senses and the closest to the center of the mind.” Hannibal says, eyes on the gauze he patiently wraps around Jack’s fingers.

“Parts that precede pity and morality.” Will says staring hard at Jack.

“They play in the dome of our skulls, like miracles illuminated on a church ceiling, revelations evoking possibilities. A stirring of associations.”

“Will’s skull was susceptible to your particular revelations.” Jack snaps.

“Will’s skull like his palate is evolving.”

Jack looks to Will. The bruised lips crinkle as though Will intends to offer more commentary, but he doesn’t. Jack holds the door on that line of inquiry and tries another.

“You played up the Medici Pazzi feud to get Pazzi here. I expected him to meet the same end as his ancestors.”

“I think you can appreciate the theatrical appeal of this punishment.” Will says, carefully neutral.

Will doesn’t bother to look at Jack. He’s watching the ivy winding up through the exposed floorboards. Tiny pink rosebuds sprout from shoots along the ivy twining its way through the blood stained crevices in the wood. He wonders if the persistent vines are visions of Purgatory or something else.

“Pazzi’s punishment looks like it was ripped right out of the *Inferno.”* Jack says watching Will’s wandering eyes carefully, wondering where he has gone.

“Tell Price to look at the eighth circle.” Will watches the ivy climb up Jack’s legs to twine around the back of the chair.

Jack doesn’t know which sins the eighth circle is reserved for, but Jack imagines the punishment has something to do with exposing one’s malignant interior. His eyes lock onto Will’s smudged fingernails and the red tinged cuticles. He reminds himself that Will is the artist of the monstrous masterpiece mounted in the center of the room and his skin crawls. Again.

Have I broken you…?

“And the envelope tucked behind his head?”

“Proof of his greed. A ledger of guilt, though it matters little now.” Hannibal says.

“Is the eighth circle greed?”

“I’ll let Price and Zeller figure it out. I’m sure they’ll doggedly sniff out the bullshit.” Will says.

Jack sighs, looks at his bandaged hands. Like the previous murder tableaux, there are multiple messages embedded in…Pazzi. Jack notes Will doesn’t deny his involvement; he obviously can’t. However, unlike Hannibal, he isn’t eager to take credit for it, either. Hannibal beams with pride, his immense ego precludes demonstrations of modesty, but Will’s is an audience of one.

“I found your uh cap and glasses on the stairs. But I seem to have lost them somewhere between the doors and here.”

Will rubs at the back of his neck. Jack is only slightly less irritating than the tag or the detergent plaguing his skin. He sighs, the weight of conversation as burdensome as the humidity and seemingly indefinite. He considers closing the windows, allowing the air conditioning to counter the soup that passes for air but the odor of decomposition already hangs from every molecule, faint but fecund and it is only going to get worse.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m on camera. We all are.” Will says, realizing Jack is waiting for some kind of response.

Hannibal clips the last strip of gauze, tapes it, and shoves the remaining gauze in his medical bag, packs up the antiseptic and scissors. He rises from his chair and looks into the tired blue eyes that greet him. The impulse to reach for the tousled head and draw it closer is quietly quashed and Hannibal picks up a length of rope instead.

“I’ll take this side if you’ll take the other.”

Will grabs the remaining rope and circles behind Jack. Jack stares straight ahead, tight lipped as Will winds the rope around his arm. The lack of movement on the other side causes Will to look up. Hannibal holds the rope in his hand eyes focused on the floor.

“Something wrong?”

“Admiring your knots.” Hannibal says.

Will bites his tongue. Hannibal isn’t admiring his knots as much as trying to figure out how he tied them. His sense of order has been disrupted. The knots won’t match. He finishes quickly leaving the perplexed Jack glancing from side to side.

“Here.” Will says, “It’s a hitched knot I use on my boat. Force of habit.”

He slips the rope from Hannibal’s hand and begins to wrap it around the arm Jack holds resentfully to the smooth wood. His skin prickles with the warm breath that touches his neck as Hannibal’s nose ruffles his hair. Will decides the knots were subordinate to pretext. He nudges the bristled cheek while glancing down at the glowering Jack until Hannibal reluctantly relents, inhaling deeply as he draws back, the fragrance of sandalwood lingering in his wake.

While fisherman Will finishes tying his knot Hannibal’s mind turns to the logistics of their escape. The beauty of the design this evening is that the prey provides the means.

“Security is aware of law enforcement in the building, but only one security guard actually saw Pazzi and Jack enter.”

“So….security should see law enforcement leave but through a different exit.” Will says.

Will understands what Hannibal has in mind. He looks to Pazzi’s clothes piled on the adjacent table. He picks up Pazzi’s jacket and checks for his *Polizia* shield. Shaking the wrinkles from the stylish sports coat he turns to Hannibal.

“This won’t fit you.”

“No. Our departed *Capitano* favored a slim cut that should look quite flattering on you, but the shoulders would be too tight for me.”

Will nods in agreement. Even without the bandages, Pazzi’s jacket would be a very snug fit. Unfortunately, Jack’s sharkskin jacket has been reduced to a bloody rag with an Armani label.

Hannibal surveys the items Will removed from Jack’s pockets earlier. His eyes alight on Jack’s FBI badge and the removable clip.

“I have all I need to impersonate the FBI.” Hannibal says. “I’ll prepare our parting gift for Jack.”

The bruised lips wrinkle slightly but Hannibal reads no dissent in the shimmering pools of blue.

Jack watches Hannibal move toward his medical bag certain he knows what’s coming and he grunts his resignation as Hannibal removes a vial and syringe. Hannibal and Will need time and distance in their favor and a lucid FBI agent would hinder their escape. He prolongs the fascinating though likely fruitless discussion in the vain hope that security comes looking for the downed *Signora* or the two members of law enforcement taking a free tour of the palazzo.

“It was valentines all along wasn’t it?”

“Just one of the tangible parts of the aggregate.” Will says busily unbuttoning the loathsome uniform.

Jack can't keep the derision out of his voice, the disdain he directs at Will settles uncomfortably on his tongue. Jack swallows it down, plenty of denunciation to go around.

"You sent messages to each other in the tableaux, embedded in the…bullshit." Jack says.

"Hearts and flowers, Jack." Will says. "Poetry wrung from blood and carved in bone."

"Roses require compost. And invitations require a response. It would have been rude of Will to ignore an RSVP, especially one as ardent as the one I sent." Hannibal says giving Will's lovely knot an especially nasty tug.

Jack stiffens and the bitter residue lining his stomach roils against the unrelenting tide of that smug voice. He knows how the press will inflate this, sensationalize it. He shudders inwardly as he imagines one horrible headline after another. His name forever linked to both of theirs.

"It's not hard to imagine what the split heart on Pazzi refers to." Jack says.

Hannibal slips a sharp look to Will, surprised Jack touches his taboo topic. Jack is either more astute than he gave him credit or he's fishing. He doesn't comment, curious to see how Will handles the increasingly tiresome Uncle Jack.

Will thinks Jack has overcome his squeamishness about the topic of romance. He shimmies out of his custodial uniform, careful to keep the clothes beneath from touching the deeply stained fabric he eagerly sheds. He leans against the shutter so he can better tug the pant legs from his feet and avoid smearing Daniel's shirt and trousers with blood. He tosses the thick damp fabric across the crimson tarp.

"You're not my confessor, Jack." Will says in his usual quiet way. "You're more the surviving witness. Take comfort in that."

"Hearts were the focus of every one of them." Jack presses, "Ruggerio's heart was split, just like Pazzi's."

"Ruggerio's?"

Will's eyes flash to Hannibal who pauses in the careful removal of the uniform from his shoulders. As usual, Hannibal's expression is inscrutible.

"You didn't tell me that, Jack."

"They found it wedged between his ribs at the autopsy." Jack continues. "Sliced nearly in half and stuffed with more of the eagle feathers we found on you. I didn't know about it when I came to see you at the hospital."

"When were you going to tell me?"

Will turns to Hannibal, Jack and his excuses already forgotten, lost in the dark sea that seems to swallow him up. Nothing else in the room exists.

"You would have found out, eventually. You always do. I have always had great…faith in you."

Jack senses the information has profound significance judging by the distant look on Will's face. Hannibal merely resumes his meticulous removal of the tacky uniform, though he frequently looks up from his task to gaze at Will.

A sifting of images and sonnets swirls around Will's skull, snippets of Baudelaire and Michelangelo, visions of eagles, saints, and titans sprawl across the tapestry of grass and dirt at Boboli. The arm of God reaches through billowing clouds to touch Adam's outstretched finger and the heavy chains slip from his wrists and ankles as Will pushes off from the mossy earth and stands up to see not himself bound to the ground but Hannibal.

His chest is split apart and as Will looks on, a shadow falls over them. He lifts his eyes heavenward to see a huge black eagle descending from the skies, its downy breast heaves as it draws it great wings across Hannibal's chest. The piercing gaze it turns on Will does not flash golden amber but deepest blue before dipping beak and claws between chalk white ribs to tear away chunks of his bleeding heart.

And as a heart torn two ways fails to show much sign of life, to you both halves are given.

Hannibal…

If being bested and bound is my delight, no wonder I'm made a prisoner, nude, alone, as a cavalier in armor turns the key.

The blood spattered panels disappear and Will sees the drawing Michelangelo sent to his cavalier in armor, Cavalieri. The talons claw at the bound Tityus, symbolic of Michelangelo's torments so deeply and sharply felt. Cavalieri became for Michelangelo the embodiment of love, pure love, an approximation of divinity. As Beatrice had been for Dante. Imagining Hannibal, not himself, as the tortured titan changes the meaning of the tableau.

Daniel had been right about *Leda and the Swan*. A god would only seek forgiveness from another god. Hannibal had been the titan chained to the rocks at Boboli and the eagle eating his heart had been Will. Hannibal truly has been twisting in an inferno of his own design. They are each other's Beatrice.

"I wasn't Adam or Prometheus. I was Tityus chained to the rocks of Hades. I was…you."

"Yes."

What does Adam feel beneath his flesh – creation or destruction? The tree of knowledge already tasted; the tree of life beckons.

Will hears the shifting of wilted sunflowers in the breeze accompanied by the cracking of bone, vertebrae snapping in Hannibal's hands like brittle wood. Out of Ruggerio's destruction Hannibal created something beautiful. The squirming thing once coiled in his belly has taken flight and become something else, something more, something Will has never felt before.

He remembers the verses from Dante's sonnet uttered one especially splendid winter morning from beneath satin warmed by sunlight and desire. He knows Hannibal will remember, too. Will speaks softly in Italian and watches the dark eyes light up.

"And of my heart aflame, Love humbly made her fearful, taste."

Pleased Will at last sees what he has always wanted him to see but could not trust himself to look deeply enough to find, he edges closer to Will, unconcerned with the large brown eyes that have receded into the back of the chair with the rest of Jack's face. In this moment, Jack is not here and the beautiful notes Will has struck compel an equally lyrical response.

"*No earthly prize seduces like love's agonizing fire*."

The line is Michelangelo's, but Will knows the sentiment delivered this time in French is entirely for him. Will rolls his eyes to Jack, favors Hannibal with a tight smile, remembering Jack doesn't speak French.

"Then Paradise must be a nest of flames." Will answers.

The thin lips twitch with Will's native fractured French. He quotes no poem to Hannibal; the words are his and they slip from his mouth like warm syrup sliding over a croissant, too quickly lost to the faint hissing of rain. Hannibal hears a hint of the bayou and the lazy hum of cicadas on a sultry summer's day in Will's voice. Heat crackles between them sending a flush of pink to flash across Will's cheeks and Hannibal accepts that Will has engaged in as much amorousness as he can manage. He is not surprised that Will switches back to English.

"You lied." The tight smile breaks, spreads across Will's face like melting butter. "You said both versions of the tableau were possible, but only one of them was true."

"In that moment, only one of them was."

"Baudelaire's verse, the key. Situational symbolism. Transcendent."

"Awaiting transformation. You see beyond that moment."

"From that moment an eternity stretches backwards and forwards."

"And from that moment to this. Are you content with this moment?" Hannibal asks.

"Sublimely contented."

Jack blinks wishing he hadn't heard that. Any of it. He can't make the connections, but he doesn't have to. He understands enough. The evidence had been incomplete at Boboli, Ruggerio's heart left inside the rib cage, inaccessible at the crime scene. Hannibal had staged the entire tableau for Will as an exercise in empathy. A vision untethered from reality; existing outside space and time. An unprecedented display on multiple levels, Hannibal has elevated murder to art. And killing has become communion with the divine.

Price was right about the drawings. The unrequited love is not unrequited anymore.

"Will, you do understand that Hannibal sees himself every time he looks at you. You created a mirror image of him, appealing to the narcissist."

Jack's voice rips through the blanket of bliss tearing asunder the beautiful moment. Hannibal turns to Jack who seems to shrink further into the chair, a withering stalk beneath the fury of his gaze. His tolerance for Jack and his digressions is decreasing by the second.

"Really, Jack. I'm right here."

Hannibal's quiet voice betrays nothing of the blaze fomenting inside. Will recognizes the ominous notes in Hannibal's tone and his fingers find Hannibal's sleeve before the dissonance introduced by

Jack disrupts the entire symphony. Were it not for Jack, there would have been no happy melody just now. He would be reading about Ruggerio's heart in Tattle Crime…

"What did you think was happening?" Will says, voice again neutral, cool. "You think you understand how my empathy works, but you don't. I told you the profiling was bad for me."

"It's not the profiling that changed you. Hannibal did. The profiling you did saved lives, Will. Saving lives doesn't do it for you anymore?"

"I don't know, Jack. I saved yours. How did that feel?" Will returns flatly. "You really didn't know I imagined killing every victim you dragged me along to see?"

Jack's eyes widen and Will isn't sure if it's the confession that unsettles him, or that the confession was withheld.

"Alana told me your empathy allowed you to reconstruct the thinking of the killer, NOT think of yourself AS THE killer." Jack says. "That's what gave you bad dreams."

"Alana was under many misconceptions." Hannibal interjects, "The truth came as quite a surprise. Knocked her for a loop."

Will ignores the narrowing of Jack's eyes. Hannibal's fondness for Alana such as it was is not diminished by his cruelty. Alana should not have been there that night. It is often a fine line between bravery and recklessness, and that night the line had been drawn by Hannibal. Alana had foolishly crossed it and Will no longer feels the weight of that stone around his neck.

"I... never corrected your misperception. Or hers. You inferred. Had you known, you would have never let me resume therapy."

Jack is not sure that is entirely accurate, but Will doesn't need to hear that. "What are you saying?"

"You didn't get that every time I profiled for you that I… imagined it over and over again? Until the next one?"

I can make myself look, but the thinking is shutting down.

What is it about this one?

It isn't this one. It's all of them. It's the next one. It's the one that I know is coming after that.

"I tried to tell you, Jack." Hannibal says as he approaches Jack with the syringe, "When you took him to crime scenes, the very air was smeared with screams."

"You actually told him that?" Will says, incredulous.

"I was attempting to paint a picture for Jack. Was the picture inaccurate?"

Will shakes his head at his doting narcissist. The brushstrokes had been too broad for Jack. And the picture had been but one of many tesserae in the vast mosaic of Hannibal's design.

Jack's arms flex beneath the cords of rope at the sight of the syringe Hannibal holds. He remembers Hannibal's words and the words that had preceded and followed his lurid observation about Will. Will had been upset by the failure to find any neurological culprit for his headaches and other symptoms; the encephalitis as yet undiagnosed. Hannibal had reduced Will's problem to left over mirror neurons from his childhood suggesting Will's concept of self was malleable.

….he doesn't just reflect, he absorbs.

Jack thinks Hannibal's assessment was boldly honest. Only a narcissistic psychopath like Hannibal would exploit the fragile psyche presented by Will. His eyes wander to Pazzi's blood caked on Will's hands and smeared over his uniform and Jack wonders if Will hears screams stained crimson in the air.

"I'm not the head of Behavioral Sciences for nothing." Jack says, the tenor of his voice rising with the indignation Hannibal's self-serving meddling has aroused. "Hannibal stole your mirror, Will."

"We smashed that mirror, Jack. Picked up the pieces and truthfully? I'm looking very hard at those pieces."

"Did you ever actually read my paper on Evolutionary Origins of Social Exclusion, Jack?" Hannibal says.

He looks to Jack expecting an answer, but Jack disappoints. He sits grim faced, chin perched on his chest.

Jack had actually been sincere when he had referred to himself as a layman upon meeting Hannibal for the first time. He had found the paper difficult reading, Hannibal's ideas and his meandering if not elegant expression had been a departure from the technical writing he was accustomed to reading. The salient take away for Jack is that Hannibal has selected Will for exclusion and has convinced Will to voluntarily exclude himself from societal norms and apparently from reality.

Hannibal had known all along how susceptible Will was, how terrified he was of his own imagination. Hannibal not only knew, he helped to unhinge Will with each subsequent crime scene and gradually he broke through every line of defense Will put up. Will had imagined the enjoyment of the kills and he experienced the terror of the enjoyment. A short walk from Will's imagined world to Hannibal's reality. If Will was not crazy before meeting Hannibal, he is now.

Will believes he is just like Hannibal and Hannibal has managed to make Will *love* him for it.

"Narcissists can't love but they can fall in love. At least, for a little while. Until the mirror fails to reflect the image of them they want to see. Narcissism is self-love that has no room for anyone else."

"Beats self-loathing." Will says.

"Your label of narcissist is beginning to wound, Jack." Hannibal says flicking the needle. "And thank you for the textbook definition. Did you read that on the internet?"

Jack chuckles through gritted teeth, chagrined at his own complacency considering who it is he wounds.

"What would you call it?"

"I call *it* what it is." Hannibal says mildly.

He caresses the smooth plastic of the syringe he holds in his hand and looks to Will who has suddenly found something deeply compelling about his feet. As he observes Will, he wonders briefly if the downcast eyes are avoidance or symptoms of another intrusion into his waking world.

“Will is capable of love. What you experience, Hannibal, is called limerence. Not…love.” Jack says.

“A rose by any other name…” Will says, attention drifting with the ivy and rosebuds climbing around the legs of the table.

Jack glances at Will who seems obsessed with the furniture but apparently marginally vested in the conversation. Jack licks at very dry lips, looks up at the impassive face seeming chiseled from light and shadow.

“It’s a state of infatuation that a narcissist craves. The desire for reciprocation is intense. A psychopath might even kill for it.” Jack says.

He stubbornly stares into dark eyes that burn bright at the taunt, and Hannibal’s face lights up with his signature arrogance.

“Tsk. Tsk. I hear an accusation, Jack. I’m familiar with the term. You should stick to forensics. Killing is a pleasure in and of itself. Successful relationships are built upon understanding and acceptance.”

“And if you can’t accept them, you change them? You ripped his mind apart because you couldn’t stand that he resisted. You have a history of breaking your patients, Hannibal. Not all of your files made it into the fireplace.”

“Not everyone responds favorably to treatment. There were plenty of successes in those files.”

“You and I will have to differ on what success looks like. Was Randall Tier a success?”

“In my opinion, yes. Every patient was unique, each with their own wiring. Most were mundane and received mundane diagnoses and therapy. Occasionally, I would find someone interesting at my door.”

“Not like Will.” Jack says shaking his head. “He is singularly unique.”

“For the record, I never thought of Will as a patient though I admit to availing myself of doctor patient privilege. His file was among the first I destroyed.”

“Will…are you listening to this?” Jack says as tranquil blue eyes meander over him.

“Impossible not to.” Will says.

“His bubble of narcissism has expanded to include you. Because you are a mirror he cannot live without. You see that, don’t you?”

Will’s marksmanship earlier rules out pharmaceuticals but Hannibal has drugged Will nonetheless and Jack knows Will does not see. Jack’s fingers knot into fists and he would pound them on the arm of the chair if he could move.

Will's answer is to slide Pazzi's crumpled but clean jacket over Daniel's soft cotton shirt. Smoothing the slender lapels along his chest, he imagines Jack's dreary diatribe dispersing with the crash of cymbals and the thunder of kettle drums, lost in the symphony that roars through his being as he lifts his eyes to Hannibal's.

"We should go before we get caught."

"Agreed."

Hannibal stifles a yawn, the prospect of continued commentary from Jack does not enthrall and they need to be on their way. The cub must vanquish the viper; purge the serpent of his inferno from his garden. He picks up his phone and sends Will the real estate listing for the property in Siena.

Will's phone warbles. After a questioning look at Hannibal he picks up his phone and grins. Will pats the pockets for Pazzi's shield. Pazzi's house and car keys are also there, but Will has no idea what Pazzi drives or if he even drove to *Palazzo Vecchio*. He thinks it would be unwise to borrow Pazzi's car anyway and he has an idea where Hannibal intends to appropriate transportation.

He attaches the *Polizia* shield to the lapel and performs a sweep of the window sills and bloody tarps for his loafers.

"Where did I…?"

Hannibal appears beside the table holding his scuffed and slightly bloodied shoes. Memories of waking mornings at Chandal Square and finding his clothes cleaned, pressed and hanging in Hannibal's armoire fill his head. Hannibal's previews of domesticity precipitate glimpses of a life to come as Will's fingers graze Hannibal's outstretched hand.

"I set them under the drape cloth when the splatter started." Hannibal says as flesh ignites again.

He readies the syringe quickly, and flicking the needle he turns to administer the dose of guaranteed nondisclosure. At least for a little while.

"Time to change the punctuation in your sentence, Jack." Hannibal says.

"Another question mark?" Jack huffs.

"An ellipsis."

Jack's mind whirls with other less tasteful metaphors that remain tucked under his tongue as he stares glumly at Hannibal and the syringe. Hannibal wastes no time jabbing Jack in the neck, sparing him neither pity nor pain.

"OUCH! What the F….?" Jack bellows.

He allows the burning to fade as Hannibal rolls the syringe across the table and gazes down with his usual superiority sprinkled with filings of contempt. Jack rephrases his question albeit a bit more eloquently this time.

"What did you give me?" Jack's tone is as sharp as the sting of the needle.

“I gave you a little hair of the dog that bit Will. You’ll only be out a short while and likely wake up in the hospital.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” Jack says rolling his neck.

“No. It’s supposed to make me feel better.”

Jack slumps in his chair deflated. This courtship of crazy was conducted right under his nose and he let it happen. Jack groans with the certainty it would have been better if Will had shot him. At least then he would have died a martyr because the FBI would have made him one if only to salvage their reputation. A formal inquiry is but a prelude to the humiliation Purnell will pile on.

“How could I have been so wrong…”Jack muses aloud.

“It’s not so much how, but where you went wrong.” Hannibal says, always pleased to elucidate. “You should have befriended him, Jack. Instead, you used him as your FBI bloodhound. A waste of untapped potential.”

“I knew the potential risks I was taking with Will. Or thought I did. You exploited his weaknesses.”

“Which of us is guilty of exploitation? You believed him fragile, unstable yet you expected your broken pony to know when enough was enough. And faulted him for his failure.”

“I expected his psychiatrist to know when enough was enough.” Jack says tilting his spinning head back to rest against the chair.

“We both saw potential in Will. I allowed Will to see his potential and express it. You attempted to suppress, control and ultimately deny him his potential.”

“You abused him, abused his empathy. You almost killed him.”

“What you saw was not abuse but love. It is through love that we allow our beloved to see their potential and by expressing that love, our beloved’s potential becomes true. What happened had to happen and my heart bled right beside Will’s.”

Jack’s head floats, he’s not sure he’s shaking it or just thinks he is. Hannibal’s delusions have reached new heights and Jack had not known that was even possible. His eyes are fixed on the white bandages peeking out from Hannibal’s unbuttoned shirt as he speaks. It was Hannibal who took Pazzi’s bullet and in exactly the same spot Jack had shot Will no less.

“You can’t love anyone but yourself, Hannibal. This relationship you have with Will is not… an authentic relationship no matter what you think in that swollen head.” Jack says.

“Define authentic, Jack.” Hannibal says while rummaging through Jack’s filthy jacket for his car keys.

“Authentic is not…inflicting abuse and calling it tough love. Authentic was the despair I felt watching *my beloved*, my Bella suffer. I would have given anything to exchange places with her. Would have died for her. I suppose you think those bandages under your shirt entitle you to claim the equivalent about Will?”

Hannibal glances down at the visible strips of gauze and tape applied by Will in the field, his shoulder flexes with the memory of the bullet striking flesh and its tender removal. He glances at

Will who has been listening to their exchange, a bemused look on his face as he shoves his precious Berretta behind his back. The blue eyes hold his in another captivating gaze as he answers Jack.

Jack is lucid, but he will likely not remember the conversation. It will blur with the dreams that are about to descend.

“Whatever I claim about Will is not nor ever was submitted for your approval but even by your narrow standard, I meet the criteria for authenticity.”

“Congratulations on proving nothing but the lengths you’ll go to…to manipulate…your…mirror.” Jack slurs, “I’m left to sink in Will’s quicksand and Will…is as mad as you are.” Jack says drowsily.

Hannibal turns dismissively and clears the remaining items from the table. Jack’s utility knife catches his attention.

“Nietzsche said there is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness, Jack.”

Jack watches Hannibal slip his favorite knife into his medical bag like a tourist stuffing mementos from the hotel into his luggage. He supposes Will would say Hannibal was just borrowing it…

Memories of sitting around Hannibal’s dining room table sputter from the recesses of his foggy head. He remembers talk of forgiveness and moving past apologies over fresh caught trout Jack had watched Will pull from the ice only hours before, and he sees at that table portents of what was to come.

Beautiful fish, Will.

It was my turn to provide the meat.

More flavorful and firm than farmed specimens. I find the trout to be a very Nietzschean fish. Trials of his wild existence find their way into the flavor of the flesh…

We will absorb this experience. It will change us.

Well, we are all Nietzschean fish in that regard…

The greatest crime now would be to walk away from what we've shared and suffered. In many ways, we need each other. We are the only ones who will know what this feels like.

Jack’s chin flops to his chest, muscles unable to hold his head up any longer. He feels himself sliding into fuzz and manages one last coherent stab at Hannibal.

“Nietzsche…never sat at your table, Hannibal. Like a wild trout…you’ll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life.”

Hannibal thinks he may indeed be looking over his shoulder, but it won’t be for Will. He dangles the car keys in front of Jack’s face.

“Jack, may I borrow the Mercedes?”

“Help yourself…” Jack grunts.

“Always beware of Greeks bearing gifts.” Will says. “Especially when the gift has GPS tracking.”

“I’m sure it does. But Jack switched it off, didn’t you Jack? Didn’t want anyone to know what you were up to.”

Jack doesn’t answer. His silence is answer enough. Even though Zee and Price know where he is, it won’t make any difference. By the time they get here, Will and Hannibal will be in the wind on their way to Du Maurier’s place. As the fuzz begins to fill his mouth he thinks he really hasn’t learned much since the last time he tangled with Hannibal. Even worse, from here on out he’ll be tangling with both of them.

Will leans over Jack’s chair and the grizzled head slowly turns to look up at him. Sort of.

Maybe it’s because of the hazy fuzz that seems to drift before Jack’s eyes but as he stares into the beleaguered face hovering over him he sees beyond the abrasions and the sutures sewn with what must have been the tiniest needle on the planet. He sees Hannibal’s martyred saints in the ruined man looking down at him. Will had been the perfect lure, the one thing Hannibal had wanted and Will had caught the monster by the balls in apparently every sense, could have brought him down, but he didn’t. He stopped fighting. He gave in. And Jack cannot forgive him for that.

“Parting words for your old boss?” Jack slurs.

“Go home, Jack. Take the pension and retirement if they offer it. Don’t come after us… don’t give me a reason to have to kill you.”

“See you around, Will.” Jack says simply before turning away.

Will feels no animosity. Another weight has been lifted, another sin purged. He hefts the duffle bag over his shoulder, figures they are leaving via the hidden closet and walks over to heave the corpse of the custodian out of their way.

Hannibal grabs the walkie talkie and pauses at Jack’s chair before joining Will. He does have one more very important question for Jack. He lifts the heavy head by the chin and peers into the half-lidded brown eyes.

“Jack…”

“Hmmmm. What… is it, Hannibal.”

“Where did you park?”

Will sets the duffle bag down and takes a seat next to Hannibal enjoying the cool spray of the Fountain of Neptune behind them. The *Piazza della Signoria* is quiet and dark but not entirely bereft of life. Shops and restaurants are closed but Florence’s nocturnal denizens still roam its streets. He sees no *Polizia* and is still pinching himself to make sure they really are sitting outside the *Palazzo Vecchio* hiding in plain sight.

“Disappointingly uneventful, wasn’t it?” Hannibal asks.

Will figures he is referring to their escape through the secret passage into the preserved Renaissance kitchen and out the side entrance facing the Uffizi beneath the bridge he had taken to enter the Palazzo.

“If that’s disappointment, it’s underrated.” Will says watching Hannibal fiddle with the walkie talkie.

They should be high tailing out of here, but like a child on Christmas Eve, Hannibal had wanted to open presents right away. Immediately upon exiting the palazzo, Hannibal had notified security of the bloodbath on the second floor.

“Sicurreza? If you are still looking for the Polizia and FBI agent, they are in the Sala dei Lorenzo… Prego… and you should call an ambulance.”

“You just couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“Better to keep the bees busy. Less likely to sting.”

Hannibal sets the walkie talkie on the stone ledge surrounding the fountain and stands, stretches his arms and glances around at the piazza cast in street light, twisting around so he can face the Uffizi’s collection of statuary gleaming beneath the portico. Will suspects the interference was not about the bees as much as the child hoping for a glimpse of Santa. And his bright red flashy sled.

“I don’t believe we’ll be coming back here anytime soon.” Hannibal says with a note of genuine sadness.

“Not in this lifetime…but we’ll have our memory palace.”

Hannibal nods, fishes in his pocket. “Here…take the Ducati. It’s parked down by the waterfront, south end of the Uffizi.”

“What…Why?”

He tosses the keys to Will and delights in the stunned look on the stunning face.

Will snatches chain and key from the air and stares at his fist. He last rode a bike, by himself, years ago, decades... He thinks ride might not be accurate. He’s not averse to riding the bike but he had imagined them arriving in Siena together.

“My injuries preclude me from safely riding it any more this evening, but more importantly it is anonymous transportation.”

“Why not just take Jack’s SUV together?” Will says thinking perhaps Hannibal is attached to his wheels.

“Eve is expecting God in the garden and believes God is unaware of her sin. Imagine her surprise when Adam rides up.”

Will grins with the utter maliciousness, mind already spitting out images of how the encounter could go.

Hannibal ruffles through the duffle bag at his feet. He retrieves a smaller bag, a black zipper travel case and holds it out to Will’s waiting hand enjoying the perplexing pucker that appears between the cub’s brows.

“Party favors?” Will asks, looking down into eyes shining with a wonderful wickedness.

“How you hunt is up to you, but should you choose, everything is clearly marked thanks to your little mouse, though the selection of…pharmaceuticals is limited. I’ll make that phone call we spoke of earlier.”

“We know she has poison. Does she have bullets?” Will says, tucking his Berretta behind his back.

“They go with her Glock, I believe.” Hannibal says with a prideful tilt of his chin, “Eve may offer an apple, but the viper invariably bites.”

The thick brows arch and the pale blue eyes brighten considerably at the challenge as Hannibal knew they would.

“The mongoose is immune to snakebite, remember?” Will says.

“So he is.”

The thin lips tic up pulled again by that invisible string Will seems able to tug effortlessly.

“You may want to remove evidence of our recent activities from your hair.” Hannibal says, eyes wandering over Will’s head. “You look a bit too primal for Eve.”

Will twists his lips in protest but concedes Hannibal has a point. Du Maurier may not be the only person he runs into on his way to Siena.

He grunts, takes a cautionary look around and leans acquiescent over the edge of the gurgling pool to wet his hands. He slides his fingers through the stubborn curls, repeating the grooming until the pink streaks disappear from his hands. He smooths the thick curls until they lay flat, sort of.

“Will…” Hannibal says stepping up beside him to wet his hands in the fountain. “Allow me.”

Will’s hands come up and he ducks his head, glaring at Hannibal. Hannibal ignores the searing blue flames confident Will’s remonstrations will cease. So infuriating…

Tsk. Tsk. My heart’s to blame? Or your face for what dispenses pain that turns all the sweeter with its flame?

A swish of braids and silky lips brush over his cheeks and Will clears his throat loudly but allows Hannibal to grapple with the unruliness that covers his head. The fingers touch the tangles tenderly and Will knows were it not for geography, Hannibal’s lips would be massaging him good bye instead.

Hannibal steps back and gripping Will by the shoulders he raises a brow as the flames are doused and the blue sea shimmers tranquilly once again. He assesses his handiwork and decides that no power on earth can tame the tousled mane. Then again, taming wasn’t really the point. He releases Will after an indulgent moment.

“Don’t wait for me to start the festivities.” Hannibal says. “My absence will add insult to injury."

Will bites at his lip as he considers the mischievous tic that plays along Hannibal’s lips, a wicked drop of fire that might well become a blaze.

He steps across the ivy covered piazza, bag tucked into Pazzi's jacket and keys in hand. Awareness prickles as a wave of heat rides his neck. He knows Hannibal is staring at him, because Hannibal is always staring at him. Will turns around and immediately notes the crinkling of brows.

"Will…"

"Yes…Hannibal?"

"*March carefully across that sacred wood which she who heeds the forked tongue has left deserted*."

"*May our steps be timed by angelic melody*." Will calls out, words quickly lost in the babbling murmur of Neptune's fountain.

Hannibal watches Will cross the piazza to the sound of approaching sirens. He heads off in the opposite direction clutching Jack's keys in his hand. He decides he'll make the call to Tatiana on his way north…to Fiesole.

The lights of downtown Siena glow to his left as Will slows the Ducati and rolls to a stop. Eyelids flutter as his mind shifts from autopilot to manual. Will blinks, flips up the visor on the helmet and looks around for a road sign, momentarily displaced. He cusses under his breath until he reads *Via Montecelso* on the sign beneath the street lamp at the corner and breathes a sigh of relief.

The Duomo of the Siena Cathedral and the imposing tower of the *Fortezze Medici* dominate the central square of the city as Brunelleschi's Dome and the Palazzo Vecchio Tower command the sky in Florence. Will is familiar with Siena from travel guides. He has never set foot within the seashell shaped *Piazza del Capo* nor has he witnessed the traditional *Palio di Siena* horse race the city is famous for. He probably never will. Du Maurier resides north of the city, and since Will had been travelling south, he will not enter Siena's city limits this evening either.

Will checks the address on his phone against the number on the mailbox. He apparently pulled up to the correct place. He's not sure he enjoyed the ride to Siena because the hour ride to Siena is a blank. He has lost time again and Will doesn't have the time to worry about it. He is grateful he is not smeared across the highway. He guides the bike up the drive and parks it close to the villa's stucco wall.

He removes the helmet, peels off the leather gloves lined with spice and sweat taking a moment to sniff the scent of Hannibal from his hands. He closes his eyes as he inhales, drifting in sandalwood his skin tingles as though Hannibal were standing beside him. But he isn't. Will is alone without even his infernal apparitions to keep him company.

He pops open the seat to remove the party favors he brought. He removes a single slender syringe and deposits it deep in a pocket. He tucks the travel case under his arm and walks up to the villa licking at his bruised lips, an anticipatory predatory impulse. Even Steven, Will thinks.

Like all motor bikes, a Ducati is noisy and the sound of its engine tends to be distinctive to the attuned ear. Will thinks Du Maurier so attuned she would recognize the specific sound of a Ducati in her sleep.

He glances around the neighborhood. The villas here are small and nearly identical. Du Maurier chose a suburb of Siena overlooking the *Riserva naturale Montecellesi*, a nature reserve surrounded by gated communities of stucco villas with terra cotta roofs. It is wonderfully secluded.

Du Maurier's house is quaint with its hanging plants, wind chimes, and smatterings of decorous sea shells. Even the cement walk and porticoes are inlaid with sea shells. There's a private drive to the side leading around back. A roofed portico extends from the house over the driveway which is gated and likely operated from inside the villa and by a remote in her car.

Thanks to the real estate listing Hannibal had provided Will is already familiar with the layout. One enters the front into a vestibule and from there into the living room. To the right are bedrooms and to the left is the kitchen. The floor plan is essentially an open square, but the courtyard is not enclosed. It opens to the backyard with a sumptuous roofed patio and Roman style marble Jacuzzi.

Will tries the front door and finds it predictably locked. There are lights on inside and Will hears singing, faint but melodic, definitely an opera. His mind swims, not unpleasantly with images of being stuffed into a penguin suit primly sitting beside an elegantly attired Hannibal on some precipitous balcony overlooking a domed theatre lined with antique velvet seats filled with top hats and tiaras.

He grins at his insanity as he rounds the corner of the villa. He stops to survey the imposing array of shrubs and trees. The wall of foliage presents an arduous entry into the backyard and Will is satisfied that the cypress and myrtle provide a sufficient shroud of privacy for what he has in mind. He walks back around front and sets down the travel case to the side of the porch in the shadow of potted pastel impatiens. He can pop outside for it later.

Will rings the doorbell. It takes what seems an interminable amount of time for the viper to unlock and open her front door. As the crack of light widens, Will understands what took her so long.

The stupefied Du Maurier nearly drops the glass of…champagne. Will reminds himself the attire, or lack of it is intended for Hannibal. He is merely the pretender to her throne. The slender shoulders stiffen beneath the zebra striped silk and the ruby lined mouth shuts quickly.

"Hello, Bedelia. Not the psychopath you were expecting?" Will's tone is as sardonic as the smile he displays.

Not that he can help himself. The sense of control is intoxicatingly sweet. He allows Du Maurier a moment to collect her thoughts while the sapphire orbs swallow him up. Will imagines unblinking reptilian slits shifting behind the painted mask and a sleek scaly tail uncoiling from between her legs to roll across the tiled floor of the vestibule and around the lacquered legs of the Italianate sofa behind her.

Crystal almost slips from her grasp but her association with Hannibal has sharpened her reflexes. Du Maurier's mind recalibrates as she gazes at a pleasingly disheveled but composed Graham. This is not the psychopath she had expected. This is the one she can use.

Her scalp tingles with the awful possibility Hannibal is also here…watching. Taking her eyes off Graham would be imprudent so she focuses on him with renewed resolve looking him up and down. And down and up. Despite the windy motorcycle ride, Graham is already perspiring again with the heat and humidity. The damp cotton shirt sticks to his skin beneath the fashionable jacket and the appreciably tight trousers cling to flesh as though painted.

She observes the cuts, bruises, and stitches that mar the exquisite face. She wonders at Hannibal's apparent need to tenderize and otherwise mark his precious Graham. Possessiveness is a troublesome trait of Hannibal's and being possessed must be one of Graham's. It is apparent that in their shared psychosis, Hannibal is the supreme narcissist and Graham is the willing flagellant.

The temptation to inquire if Graham came to finish his interrupted dessert is quickly cast aside. Inviting associations of that sort can only lead to more of the same. She ponders the possibility that Graham has brought his weapon. Appetites being what they are, Du Maurier decides on a more tactful line of inquiry that might actually reveal useful information before she allows him inside.

"Mr. Graham. As I recall the last time we met you tried to shoot me." The sapphire eyes search jacket and trousers for sign of the Berretta.

"The last time we met you stabbed me with a syringe. Even Steven?"

"I do not subscribe to the concept of Even Steven. Where is he?"

Will imagines that would be the question foremost on Du Maurier's mind. He can appreciate her dilemma all too well. When God is unseen, one prefers to know from which direction the thunderbolts will fly. Unfortunately for Du Maurier, Will isn't feeling particularly compassionate at the moment. But, Adam must summon the garden for this counterfeit Eve.

"Well, he didn't come on the bike."

The condescending smirk on the red lips fades immediately. Will waits. Probable excuses for Hannibal's absence are running through Du Maurier's wine bloated head as she manages expectations and edits the script she prepared just for him. The idea that Hannibal reserves the pleasure of killing and eating her for himself has hardened like cement in her mind.

By that logic, the idea that he would not dare to challenge Hannibal for the honor and pleasure should be similarly impermeable. Besides, she also believes God is not aware of her sin.

"Why send you?"

Will shrugs a shoulder, allows his mouth to slacken as though weighted with disdain.

"Why does God do anything? He was curious what would happen if he left Adam and Eve alone in the garden. May I come in?"

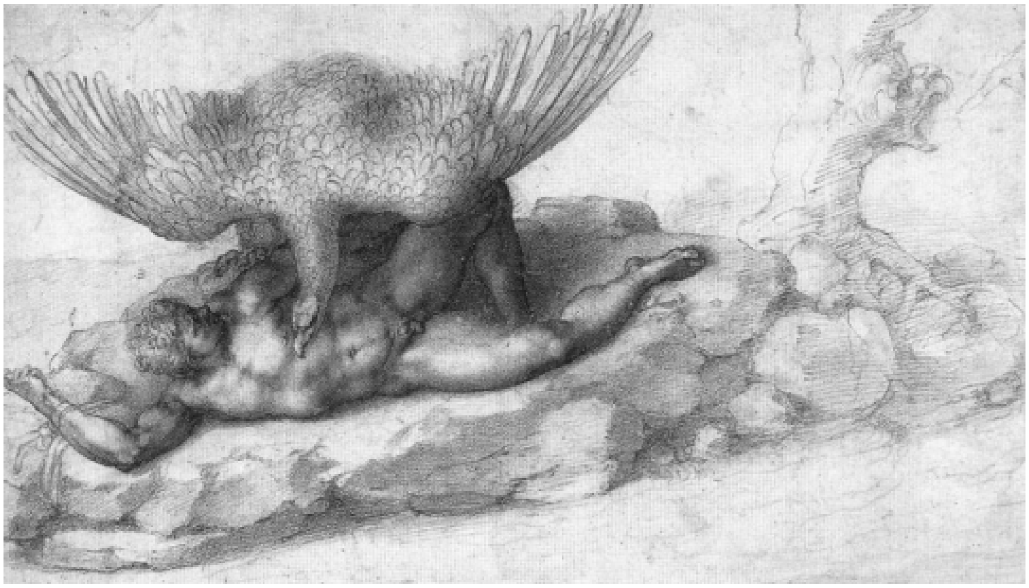
Will nods past the vestibule toward the living room, carefully calibrating lips to curve solicitously. The pupils suspended in sapphire dilate instantly and Will knows he has achieved perfect pitch.

Du Maurier considers Graham's willingness clearly demonstrates the desire to manipulate and yet Graham's tone borders on the flippant. She thinks the tartly spoken observation is entirely Graham's; it is not a directive from the almighty Hannibal. Du Maurier wonders exactly what has transpired between them since she saw them last. She detects a delectable whiff of dissent in the air. Perhaps their date did not end well. There is only way to find out if salvation and survival are embodied within this broken creature on her doorstep.

Like Graham, her choices are limited, condemned to play in Hannibal's garden a little longer. They have been testing the water so to speak, now they must establish boundaries. Du Maurier unlocks the screen door.

"I don't believe we've ever been alone, have we?" Du Maurier says. "A most intriguing, if not contrived circumstance."

"I couldn't agree more." Will says, as the viper turns trailing tail behind her through creeping vines and pastel blooms.



Punishment of Tityus, Michelangelo, 1532

Chapter End Notes

Notes for Chapter 88
Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt. Mark 14:32
Will and Hannibal's discussion of amor fati plucked from Nietzsche's The Gay Science and Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Also lifted phrases from the Enchiridion of Epictetus, Stoic philosopher whose writings influenced Marcus Aurelius.
In Plato's Apology, Socrates' Defense, Plato records Socrates' trial. Will paraphrases Socrates' observation that the prosecutors Anytus and Meletus can only sentence him to death, see him die, but they cannot rob him of who he is. Meletus and Anytus will not injure me: they cannot; for it is not in the nature of things that a bad man should injure a better than himself.
And Hannibal follows up with Achilles' argument with his mother, Thetis, who warns him that his death is fated if he takes revenge on Hector for Patroclus. (Iliad, Book XVIII) Socrates also quoted this same passage in his defense according to Plato's Apology.
Creature Hannibal and Will refer to Virgil's Aeneid Book VI in Will's hallucination; appropriately, Aeneas enters the Gates of Hades in these verses and would have drawn his sword on mad Discord and the other shadows had his knowing companion not warned him.
Will and his Achilles selectively employ verses culled from Dante's Purgatorio and the Iliad. Purgatorio, Cantos I and II. Iliad, Books, XVII and XXIII.
But because you are Helen's husband, and therefore the son-in-law of Zeus, it is not ordained

that you, Menelaus, favored by Zeus, should meet your end in Argos, the horse-pasture. Instead the immortals will bear you to the Elysian Fields, at the world's end, where yellow-haired Rhadamanthus dwells, and existence is best for men. There is no snow there, no rain, or fierce storms: rather Ocean brings singing breaths of the West Wind, to refresh them. Homer, Odyssey, Book IV:548-592
Will and Hannibal quote from James Agee, Description of Elysium, From Permit Me Voyage,1934.
Will imagines he hears Hannibal's voice quote from Michelangelo's sonnets, Nos. 15 and 98 (as translated by John Frederick Nims)
Will quotes from the famous first sonnet of Dante's Vita Nuova and Hannibal responds with a line from Michelangelo's sonnet No. 98.
Will hears young Achilles borrow from Michelangelo's Sonnet No. 78.
Hannibal and Will quote loosely from Dante's Purgatorio, Canto XXXII. Dante and Beatrice take a chariot to the Tree of Good and Evil.
Hannibal quotes from Nietzsche's "On Reading and Writing" from Thus Spoke Zarathustra to Jack.
"What you saw was not abuse but love. It is through love that we allow our beloved to see their potential and by expressing that love, our beloved's potential becomes true. What happened had to happen and my heart bled right beside Will's." (I am aware Hannibal speaks to Jack using phrasing from a conversation Will imagined previously during Season 2. This is deliberate.)

A very heartfelt Thank You to the readers who have stuck with the story for the unintended hiatus. The intention is to post the remaining chapters this summer, perhaps at the same time.
Coming Up: Will and Bedelia play viper and mongoose. And Achilles did not forget about that armor.

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